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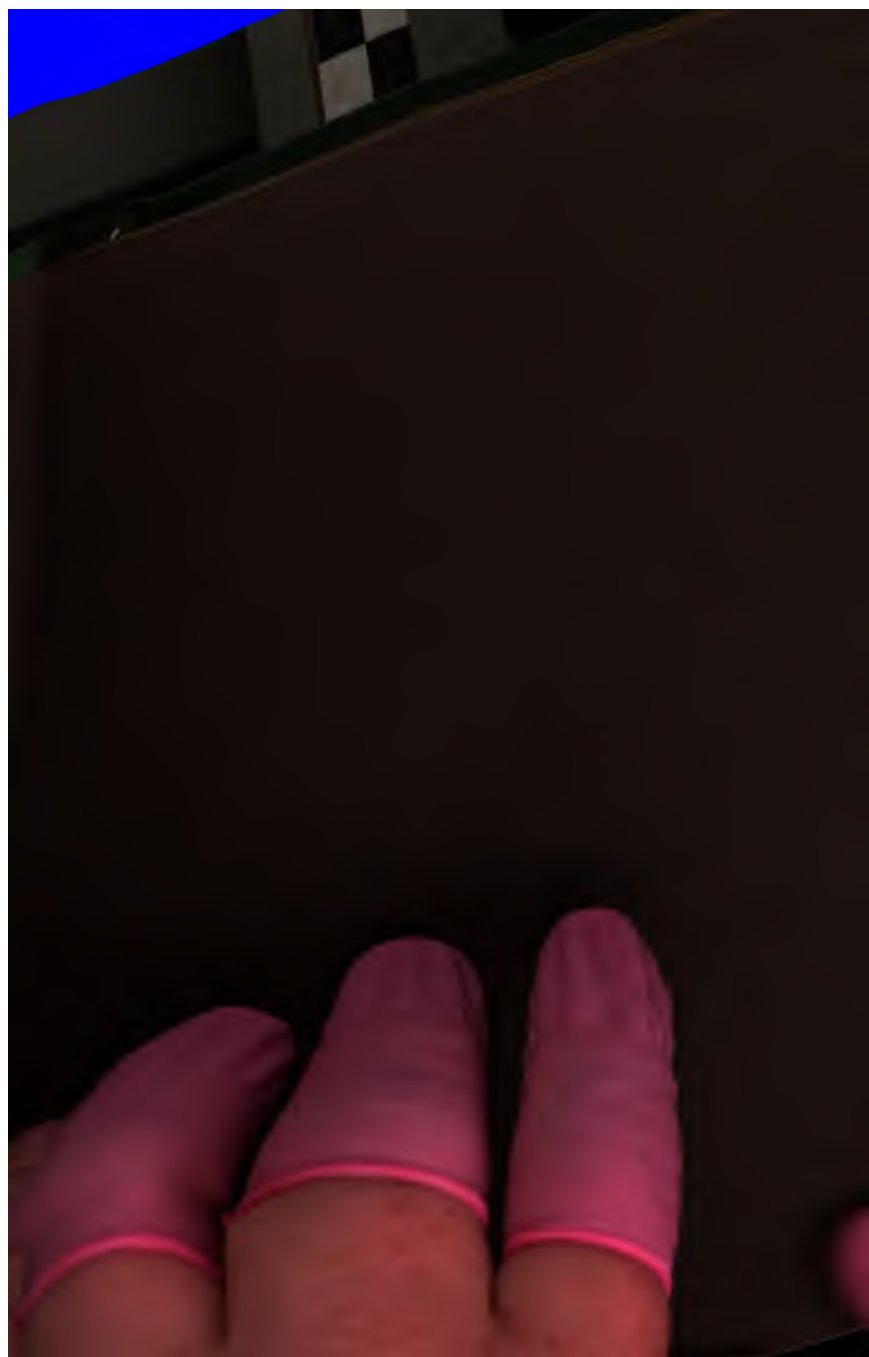
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VERNEY COURT:

AN IRISH NOVEL.

BY

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"THE WITCH-THORN," "THE TWELFTH RIG," &c.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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VERNEY COURT :

AN IRISH NOVEL.

CHAPTER I.

BOUND FOR IRELAND.

SEVERAL years have passed since the events occurred which I am about to relate in this narrative.

It is not, however, lest they should slip from my memory that I have now resolved to write them. There is little chance of that while I sit at my window, and listen to the voice of the Atlantic; while my eye rests

upon a blackened pile in the distance, standing out gaunt and bare against the sea and sky—an irregular, ugly ruin, with none of the picturesque beauty of decay about it, covered by no softening mantle of ivy—on whose dark walls, it seems to me, the moonbeams never rest, and over which the stars shine paler than elsewhere. No ; it is not lest I should forget a single circumstance that I write ; but rather in hope that by doing so they may haunt my mind less continually.

The commencement of my story dates from a certain March morning, and the scene that rises before me is a room in a house in London. Boxes stand corded on the floor, and beside them a young girl in travelling dress—myself.

“ Grace, are you ready ? ” calls a voice on the stairs, and the next minute a lady enters.

“My dear Grace, it is time for you to start. You have but just time to reach the train. Cheer up, my dear; though you are going among strangers, they will not long be so. Perhaps before a month you may have quite forgotten your friends here.”

“Oh, no! no, indeed, I shall not, Mrs. Compton, I cried.

“Well, my dear, it is time now to say good-bye. But remember, if ever you should be in any trouble or difficulty, you will always find a welcome and a home here. Come now.”

I followed Mrs. Compton, whose school I was leaving, downstairs, and, having taken a hasty farewell of my school companions, entered the carriage which was waiting for me.

They stood at the door as I drove off,

waving their handkerchiefs and kissing hands ; but I could scarcely see them for the blinding tears.

Leaving school was to me a very different thing from what it usually is. This school had been my home for fourteen years ; I had been sent to it by my guardian, after my father's death, when I was but six years old, and from that time till now had never left it for a single day.

My guardian, with whom I was going to live, was a complete stranger, and in no way related to me. He had been my father's friend, I had heard, and this, with the knowledge that his name was Verney, and that he resided in Ireland, was the amount of my information respecting him.

Of my own position I was equally ignorant, and did not know whether I possessed a

fortune or was dependent on my guardian. On this point Mrs. Compton knew no more than myself.

I had delayed my departure from school for two years longer than had at first been arranged. I could now crave no further respite. The friendships of fourteen years must be torn asunder.

To the extreme west of the western province of the western isle was I bound. When once there I would be dead to my friends and to the world for ever. I had almost forgotten that I was going to the land of my birth ; yet, such was the fact. But, though both my parents had been Irish, I had no connections in Ireland, and I had little reason to suppose that my guardian would give me a very cordial welcome.



CHAPTER II.

THE WILD WEST.

WHEN next you behold me, reader, I am seated in a little dingy apartment of a small hotel, in the somewhat dreary-looking Connaught town where the railway terminated. I have been waiting there more than an hour for the carriage which is to convey me to Verney Court, my guardian's residence.

My patience is becoming completely worn out. I have exhausted every means of passing away the time that the room affords, and

have looked at the clock, hanging over the narrow black mantelpiece, so often that I have been obliged to bind myself not to do so more than every ten minutes.

At last, in a paroxysm of despair, I again take up yesterday's paper, and, determined to be engaged in a way that would not discredit the school I had left, set myself the profitable task of finding out and correcting the grammatical errors in the advertisements.

I might have got through a column, when the sound of persons talking outside diverted my attention.

The partition was thin, and I could not help hearing nearly every word. The principal voice was that of a gentleman, who seemed to be in conversation with the owner

of the inn, and the first words that I think I specially noticed were—

“So then he’s very popular, you say, this Mr. Nugent?”

“Faith, sir, that he is, and why wouldn’t he be? Sure you wouldn’t know it for the same place since he came to it, everything’s so improved.”

“He’s always on the spot, I suppose?”

“Faith, very nearly sir, except when something takes him up to Dublin or over to London for a start.”

“I hear it’s a very fine property. Well,” with a sudden and sharp change of tone, as if addressing a new-comer, “why are you listening so attentively? Is there anything remarkable in what I’m saying, or that concerns you?”

“I’m listenin’ because I hear the name o’

the best gentleman in the country," was the response, in a rich Irish brogue.

"Indeed! That's the general story, it seems. Mr. Nugent doesn't run much risk of getting shot among you, then?"

"Shot! is it? So that's all you know about it, to hint sich a thing. Bedad! whoever shot him, or attempted it, 'ud rue the day. By gor! we'd shoot him ourselves, widout axin' lave o' judge or jury!"

"That's unusual talk for an Irish peasant, my friend."

"Unusual or not, it's thrue, an' if your honour's comin' to these parts you'll hear it from many another besides Shane O'Reilly. Whose fault it is that it's unusual is a question for some people to settle. It isn't Mr. Nugent, at all events."

"This wonderful gentleman, who appears

to have accomplished that task, considered impossible, of pleasing the Irish peasantry, is your landlord, I suppose?"

"Faith, no sich loock! Mr. Verney's my landlord."

"Come, Shane," interposed the innkeeper's voice, "there's a young lady waiting here this long time for the carriage."

"You omadhaun! why didn't you tell me afore? I wouldn't kape a lady waitin' for the 'varsal world. Sure, they never tould me what time to come here. We're in since yesterday, the bastes an' I, but we war at a fair all the mornin'. If I'd jest known, though, nothing 'd have made me kape the lady. Make haste, will you, an' tell the lady the carriage is here."

"Why doesn't Mr. Verney have a coachman, instead of sending for you to drive-

when he wants the carriage?" asked the other, as he seemed to move towards the door of my prison.

"Arrah, how often is the carriage used? Not wanst in a year, may be. Why, it was as rusty as an ould nail when I tuck it out. Be quick, Mr. Snail."

The door opened, and the innkeeper, half-breathless, as if he had run on the instant, announced—

"It's come, Miss."

As I passed out, I glanced at the gentleman who stood there. He was young and handsome, and had the air—despite a certain something I did not like—of one in a good position.

"Is it far to Verney Court?" I enquired of the driver, a fine, brawny-chested, good-looking young fellow.

“In throth, middlin’, my lady ; matter o’ thirty mile. But they’ll do it quick, the craythurs,” with a fond glance at the two somewhat wild-looking horses, who were shaking their manes and impatiently pawing the ground, as if eager to be off.

“Is Verney Court a modern building ?” I asked, wishing to get an idea of the place, that I might amuse myself by filling up the picture during the long drive.

“Oh ! faith, Miss, it was built afore the flood, I’m thinkin’. It’s an ould, ancient place entirely.”

Then, murmuring a few words in Irish to sooth the restive animals, he mounted to his seat, and we drove away.

As we left the town, the great, indeed, almost alarming, speed with which we proceeded astonished me. We seemed flying

through the country. The horses galloped up and down hills without slackening speed, as if they were running away, which, at times, I actually thought was the case, but the driver only smiled when I expressed my fears. I afterwards heard that this was nothing very remarkable in the west of Ireland, where horses are specially trained for speed and travelling great distances.

Our road lay along the banks of a vast lake—

“With all its fairy crowds
Of islands that together lie,
As quietly as spots of sky,
Amongst the evening clouds.”

On the opposite shore, tall mountains reared their heads, and thrust out their giant shoulders into the lake. We next turned aside in a north-westerly direction, and entered a deep glen, lined on each side with

lofty mountains, all nearly of the same height, all dressed in the same yellow uniform of furze. I passed through their midst like a queen making a royal entrance, with her soldiers drawn up to receive her.

As we emerged from this glen, a scene of such varied and romantic beauty as I had never conceived burst upon my view. Mountains of stupendous altitude, rising like an amphitheatre to the clouds; some covered with furze and creeping underwood, others barren and brown; heath and moorland stretching away in the distance for miles; noble rivers and lakes studded with little wooded islands, some almost covered with the ruins of an ancient castle or mouldering abbey.

As the heart of a child bounds with instinctive love when brought face to face

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for the first time with a mother it has never seen, my heart bounded with love towards my native country. I now could understand why the Irish feel such a passionate devotion to their land, why their poets speak of it in terms of tender endearment, why they cannot bear to leave it, and pine for it when obliged to do so.

As we advanced, the scene became yet more wildly picturesque; all traces of cultivation vanished, no human habitations were visible, not a sign of man or his works. Here, Nature reigned alone, supreme and awful. Before me rose, bleak and bare, the "wild-eyed" mountains of Connemara, the clouds resting on their summits, their brown sides clothed with no verdure; they seemed to disdain even that adornment.

Around were spread immeasurable wastes

and boundless bogs ; no tree to be seen, far as the eye could reach. The desolation of the scene was savage, yet sublime.

A sound, as of the roaring of the mighty ocean, was now heard. I thought it must be very near, and stood up in the carriage to look, but the mountains bounded my view. Louder and louder grew the sound, and nearer and nearer, till, on turning a point, it came full in view—the grand Atlantic, rough even on a summer's day, tremendous now.

Like an army of giants rushing from the west to overwhelm the land, came on the mighty waves—terrible, white-crested—dashing themselves with furious cries on the rocky coast, there to expire.

The grandeur of the spectacle was overpowering. I felt faint and dizzy. Living in London all my life, I had never seen any-

thing greater or grander than the sea at Brighton.

The road now began to slope down gradually to the shore. After a few minutes we came in sight of a wide, arched gateway, but no house was visible. I observed, when the carriage drew up before it, that the gate was ornamented with curiously-carved, grotesque heads, and other strange devices.

A man came out from the lodge to admit us, and we entered a wide, winding avenue, the broad centre drive of which was grass-grown, and covered with rank weeds. On each side there had evidently stood a line of noble trees, but the greater number of these had been cut down, and nothing remained but a stump to mark the place where they once flourished. The rest were in process of cutting down, and lay sprawling half across

the path, with their great branches—on which the buds were just bursting—spread out.

The wall, dividing the avenue from the adjoining fields, was half broken down, and large stones on which the moss had grown, lay among the rank grass and fallen trees—evidence of the long-continued neglect of the owner.

This avenue wound along for about half a mile, when it was terminated by a little gate, half off its hinges, and swinging backwards and forwards in the evening breeze. Passing through it, we were in a square court, grass-grown and over-run with weeds like the avenue. No sign of flowers or garden-beds anywhere, but near the house—which was directly opposite—stood several tall

trees that had not, at least as yet, shared in the slaughter of their comrades.

The house was in keeping with its surroundings, grey and ancient. It was of Spanish architecture, and surrounded by a deep moat. The roof was battlemented and turreted, the windows narrow and prison-like. It looked more like the ruins of an ancient Spanish fortress than a habitable dwelling-house.

The western wing had fallen into a state of almost total ruin, while the eastern side seemed still quite whole and strong. It was a dreary, dreary place, with the Atlantic roaring in its rear for ever, and the desolate moorlands and barren mountains separating it from all human habitations. My heart sank very low as I gazed at it. How could

comfort or domestic happiness dwell in such an abode? There was no sign of life about it; no lights gleamed from the narrow windows, no glow of fire shone out to say that, though gloomy without, it was not so within.

I was beginning to think that the house was really uninhabited, when in answer to the driver's loud summons, the ample door was thrown open, and I was admitted into a large, wide hall, nearly dark, where I stood while the man brought in my boxes. The sound of shuffling footsteps retreating downstairs caught my ear, and I heard a gruff voice calling—

“Where are yiz? Here's Shane O'Reilly, come back wid the carriage an' the young lady.”



CHAPTER III.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

IN answer to this somewhat unceremonious announcement, a door opened, and a lady appeared. I could not see her features distinctly, but her figure and walk showed me she was elderly. Her voice, when she spoke, was kind and cordial. She was about to bring me into a room on one side of the hall, when a light footstep sounded overhead, and the figure of a young girl came flying down the stairs, her white dress and golden hair

lighting up the gloom. She sprang towards me, and throwing her arms round my neck, kissed me.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re come,” she cried. “You shall never, never leave this place, at least not till I have left it first. I have got you now, and I’ll keep you. You shall share my captivity, and make it less dreary. What is your name?”

“Grace Melville,” I told her.

“Yes, I knew your surname was Melville, but I didn’t know your other name. My name is Catherine, I’m Mr. Verney’s daughter. Go away, Mrs. Baker, you’re not wanted. This is my property, and you have nothing whatever to do with it.”

“But recollect, dear, how tired Miss Melville must be. I think you had better let her come to my room now, and rest, and to-

morrow you can talk to her as much as ever you like, and show her everything.”

“Oh, no, thank you, indeed she shall not go to your room. What a vain old woman it is, to think that Miss Melville would feel less tired there than with me. Do I look such a terrible bore, Miss Melville?”

“No, indeed,” I answered.

“Well, come then. I’m your keeper. This is the way to your dungeon.” And she linked her arm into mine, and led me up the wide oak staircase, chattering all the way in her low, musical voice, the slightly languid accent of which had struck me at once, accustomed as I was to the quick and—it must be confessed—somewhat sharp tones of English girls.

At the farthest end of a long gallery, on each side of which were doors, my room, or


dungeon—as Catherine had appropriately called it—was situated. It was a very large room, full of odd corners, the darkness of which the lamp that burned dimly on the dressing-table served only to show. A dim, red, wood fire was burning in the enormous grate, which, though bricked in on each side, was still so large that the fire only half filled it. Over the mantel-piece hung a large, old fashioned glass in three divisions. Against the walls stood high, narrow-backed chairs, and old fashioned oak chests, curiously carved, and last, but by no means least, occupying half of one of the long walls, and jutting out far into the room, stood a bed, or rather a temple, covered with a massive roof, from which hung heavy curtains, and shut in with great oak sides.

“How do you like your room?” said Catherine.

“It’s very large and very gloomy,” I answered, shuddering, “I shall feel quite afraid to sleep in that ancient temple,” pointing to the bed.

“Oh, they are all the same; mine is larger, I think, and this room is the smallest in the house. It looks quite cheerful now, compared to what it did. I wish you had seen it before it was settled. Oh, such mountains of dust as were swept out of those corners and down from the roof of that bed, yesterday. You would have thought it was raining dust. The room has not been in use for years.”

This information did not serve to make me feel more at home in the gaunt apartment.



I glanced round it again, and thought it had a strange *eerie* look.

While I changed my dress, and Catherine assisted me to take out a few things that I wanted from one of my boxes, I had leisure to observe her appearance, which the darkness of the hall had prevented my doing before; and never had my eyes rested on a face so exquisitely, almost strangely lovely. The features small and perfectly regular; skin like whitest marble, the blue veins distinctly traced along the forehead and eyelids; cheeks of soft, peachy bloom; full, rich, pouting mouth, short upper lip, and teeth that looked like pearls set in coral. Yet it was not these, nor her sylph-like form, and rich luxuriant hair of the true golden colour, that gave her beauty its peculiar character. It was her eyes, long in shape, of a deep, dark

blue, shaded by lashes of great length, and of a much darker tint than her hair. Though sparkling and dancing now, they were not merry eyes ; beyond the sunshine, far in their fathomless depths, shone a mystic light, like that said to illumine the eyes of those predestined to an early death. They reminded one of dark, mysterious wells to whose depths the sun cannot pierce, though it may play upon the surface. This look might be accounted for by the fact that she had lived all her life in the midst of wild, desolate scenery, with no companions of her own age. Her manner seemed to me very childish and impulsive, but I thought I should like her.

I was now ready to go downstairs, and Catherine took me by the hand.

“I am going to introduce you to old Donal. You haven’t seen him yet. He’s the

greatest specimen of antiquity in the place. The people call him Donal Dhue, black Donal, because they think he has dealings with evil spirits. They are all afraid of him, but I'm not afraid of him, not a bit. He's Mr. Verney's steward, and manages everything. He has lived here ever since I was born, but no one knows where he came from. It seems he appeared quite suddenly here, and that he looked just as old then as he does now, and I think that must be true, because as long as ever I can remember he has looked the same. Oh, he's a wicked old fellow! He tells me queer things sometimes."

"Who is the lady you called Mrs. Baker?"
I asked, as we went downstairs.

"Oh, that's the housekeeper. She has lived here even longer than old Donal; she remembers when he came."

We entered a large room on the basement story. Seated at a table drawn close to the wide hearth, where burned a great red fire, was an old man, dressed in coarse grey frieze. He seemed to be at his supper, for before him was a large bowl, apparently containing tea, and softened crusts of bread, which he was busy shoveling into his mouth with a noise by no means agreeable.

“This is Miss Grace Melville, Mr. Donal Dhue,” said Catherine. “Stand up, sir, and make a bow like a gentleman!”

The old man stood up, and pulled his thin grey hair, then, sitting down again, resumed his employment, only stopping occasionally to peer into a pot that was boiling on the fire, and which, from his anxiety in watching it, I suppose contained some reinforcement to his supper.

“ How are the clocks getting on, Donal ? ”
said Catherine.

“ First rate, Miss Catherine. They’ll be done jest now. All the dust and dirt’s comin’ off ’em beautiful. They’ll be lovely,” and the frightful old man smacked his lips.

“ What are they for ? ” I whispered to Catherine. “ Surely the Irish do not *eat* black beetles.”

Catherine burst’ out laughing.

“ May be you’d like to know how I cook ’em, Miss,” said the old man. “ I’ll jest make ye sinsible. Ye see, clocks ’ll take to bad ways whin they’re neglected, like their betthers, an’ in this out o’ the way place it’s not asy to get ’em med straight agin. Why, bless ye, whin I cum here, there war four clocks in the house, an’ ne’er a one iv ’em right. The first was slow, the second fast,

the third was for ever sthrikin', but never the right number, the contrairy baste! an' the fourth wouldn't sthrike at all, at all. A nasty dirty, lyin' pack they war, always a-contradictin' iv aich other. I soon cured 'em o' their tantrums. An' how d'ye think I done it? I jest biled 'em. Ye see it's a 'cumulation like o' dust, or a thickenin' o' the oil on the pivots, that sets 'em astray, an' the way to cure that, is to bile 'em. Bile 'em in rain wather, then dhry 'em well at the fire, an' bedad, they'll go like mad. Whenever I ketch 'em thryin' on any o' their thricks wid me, that's what I jest do, an' it soon mends their manners. Ye see that clock beyant there, sure where's there a betther in the 'varsal world, an' it was biled three times. This ould lady here, I'm doin' for the fourth time."

“That will do, you tiresome old fellow,” interrupted Catherine, pulling his hair. “We’ve had quite enough of you and your clocks. Come, Grace,” and taking me by the hand again, as if she were afraid I might escape if she did not hold me, she tripped upstairs.

I did not like the look of this Donal, though he seemed so simple, chattering about his clocks; there was a sharp, cunning twinkle in the corner of his grey eye that seemed to prove him more knave than fool.

“I have not seen your father yet,” I said to Catherine.

“It’s easy to see you have not, indeed. When you have seen Mr. Verney, you won’t be impatient for a repetition of the honour!”

This was a strange speech from a daughter. I had noticed before, and thought it strange,

that, when speaking of her father, she always called him Mr. Verney.

“ But I suppose we must go to him now. Mrs. Baker will scold me if I keep you any longer without your tea. It’s later than usual, too, and he’s waiting.”

Laying her hand on the handle of a door at the end of the long wide hall, she turned it softly, and we were in an apartment larger than either I had yet seen, with oak panelled walls, and massive shutters of oak to the windows, closely barred across, which accounted for the fact that I had seen no light when approaching the house. The room was gloomily and old fashionedly furnished.

Mr. Verney was seated near the dim red fire. Though he held a newspaper in his hand, he did not seem to be reading, but was gazing intently into the fire. He turned

round slightly as we entered. Catherine approached him quickly and noiselessly, still holding my hand, and introduced me to him in a low, constrained voice, very different from her former light careless tone. She then took her place in silence at the tea-table.

Mr. Verney was not an old man, scarcely fifty, I think, yet his face was wrinkled and seamed like that of a man of seventy, and his strong, athletic frame bent almost double. Mr. Verney looked like a man who "could a tale unfold," but Mr. Verney was not the man who would be likely ever to do so. If sorrow and bitter disappointment he had experienced, he did not require sympathy, and none would have dared to offer it, even had they felt inclined. If he had passed through the fire, it had not purified, but scathed him.

I could not exactly define, though I tried hard to do so, what it was that made me shrink away instinctively when Mr. Verney approached me, and shudder at the touch of his hand. The light blue eyes glared upon me with a cold, cruel glare. I involuntarily thought of the hyena, and shuddered again.

The tea was got through in silence and constraint, Catherine replying to my remarks only with an occasional low monosyllable, accompanied by a timid, fearful glance towards her father. He was reading, or, at least seemed to be reading his newspaper, but I felt an unpleasant consciousness that he heard every word we uttered, and, whether it was this, or that Catherine's constraint had infected me, I know not, but I soon began to be as constrained as herself.

As soon as tea was over, I excused myself

on the plea of fatigue, and retired to my room. I was, indeed, very tired, so tired and sleepy, that even the grim temple-bed looked inviting; it would, at least, afford me rest; I was so wearied I would be sure to sleep anywhere to-night, I thought.

I had not been in my room above five minutes, when I heard Catherine's light, tripping footsteps coming along the corridor, and then a tap at my door. I opened it, and there she stood, comb and brush in hand.

"May I come in, Grace, and settle my hair here with you?"

I told her she might, though I did not feel much inclined for her chatter then, and knew that it was for that special purpose she had come. She drew a chair to the fire, and having thrown on a fresh log of wood from

a pile that lay beside it, established herself in a comfortable attitude, with her fairy-like feet on the fender.

"Now, Grace, get a chair and sit down. I want you to tell me about London, about your school companions there."

"What about them, Catherine?"

"What were they like? in appearance, I mean. Were they like you?"

"Some of them, perhaps."

"Were they prettier?"

"Some were prettier, and some plainer, if you can conceive that."

"Were they as pretty as I am?"

"No," I answered, amused at her childish vanity.

"I'm very glad. Cecil said once that he had never seen any one so beautiful as me,

and he has travelled all over the world, even to America—but I don't know. I can imagine a more beautiful face."

She stood up, and leaning her dimpled white arms on the mantel-piece, gazed long and earnestly into the glass, with an anxious, critical expression of countenance that was vastly amusing. Standing beside her, I saw my own face reflected therein, too, and almost started at the contrast it presented to her radiant beauty. How dull and colourless I looked, how staid and sober, how unattractive, with my dark brown hair that never would wave or curl, and grey eyes that were not bright at any time, and less than usually so now from weariness. Yet I had formerly considered myself rather pretty, and been considered so by my companions, but this

radiant being would have spoiled even a beauty, how much more than me, who never went in for more than ordinary good looks. I saw her glance from her own image to mine, and smile a little satisfied smile.

“Do you think it’s true, Grace?” she said, sitting down.

“Think what true?”

“What Cecil said.”

“It’s very likely he thinks so.”

“But would others? Have you seen prettier people?”

“No, I never thought there was any one half so beautiful till I saw you.”

It was the truth, and I might as well gratify her.

“Oh, I should like so much to go to London,” said Catherine, after a pause, and

with a little sigh, "to be admired, and to see life, and to live. I wonder shall I ever, ever escape from this place."

Her coral lips were beginning to pout, and a darkness was gathering over her bright brow.

"But to be admired does not make people happy, Catherine. Perhaps you would not be happy in London, after all."

"Oh, yes, I should. I'd be happy if I could see people, and go to balls and theatres, and wear things like this," touching a beautiful little diamond brooch that sparkled on her breast. "Cecil gave it to me," she continued, the darkness clearing off her forehead as suddenly as it had come. "It's the only thing of the kind I have. Mr. Verney would like to get it, I know, and sell it, but he's not going to have it."

“And who is this Cecil that gives you presents, and says he never saw any one so beautiful?” I asked.

“Cecil Nugent.”

Nugent! was this the Mr. Nugent, whose name I had heard at the inn that day?

“You’ll see him to-morrow, most likely,” went on Catherine. “He generally comes here in the evening. His place is about three miles from this. It is a beautiful place, not like this. He is the only person ever comes here, except Mr. and Mrs. Preston, sometimes, and I had rather they didn’t come, because they always begin such long, tiresome discussions about politics and religion, and then Cecil doesn’t mind me so much.”

“And do you care about that, Catherine?”

“Of course I do. He says he loves me, and has asked me to marry him.”

“And will you, Catherine?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I said I would.”

“Then why do you wish to go to London so much? Isn’t his admiration sufficient for you? I don’t think you can love him if it is not.”

“Well, perhaps I don’t. At all events, his admiration is not sufficient for me. I want to be admired by others, too. Is that love? I don’t know its symptoms, but you seem to be well acquainted with them.”

“No, indeed,” I answered, rather indignantly.

I had finished settling my hair long ere this, and so had Catherine, though she showed no sign of leaving me. So, putting ceremony aside—which I saw it would never answer to keep up with her—I told her that I was tired, and could not talk to her any longer to-night.

She then left, telling me to be up early in the morning.

I had thought that I should fall asleep immediately on going to bed, yet I did not. I lay thinking for some time, till the clock on the stairs striking twelve reminded me suddenly of the fact that I was not going to sleep; that, on the contrary, I was becoming more and more awake every moment. There was a peculiar tapping sound going on at the door of my room since I had shut it, as if some one outside were rapping low and incessantly to get in. It was a ghostly sound to listen to, and strange, superstitious fancies crowded to my mind. I thought of all those who long ago had slept in this very bed that I was lying in, and occupied this room, and who now lay in a colder and narrower resting place, and fancied that those were their

spirits tapping at the door for admittance, angry that the room which had been theirs in life, and that had lain undisturbed ever since their death, should now be profaned by a stranger.

There was another thing troubled me, too, though I hardly like to mention it, it seems so childish that I should have been disturbed by such a thing, but in the dark the imagination reigns omnipotent. In the shutters of the window directly opposite to me were two holes that to my fancy looked like eyes, and at them I seemed compelled to gaze by a kind of fascination. I imagined they were constantly changing their expression. Sometimes they were menacing, sometimes warning, then pitying, and again they seemed to glare at me with a cold, cruel glare, like Mr. Verney's eyes.

I fell into a troubled sleep at last, out of which I suddenly started wide awake, and with the cold perspiration standing on my forehead. I sat up in bed, the room was still quite dark, the monotonous tapping was still going on at the door; the eyes encountered my own with the hyena glare. I was trembling all over. An indescribable impression of horror was on my mind, but, though I tried, I could not recall the dream which had caused me to waken in such a fright; only I knew that Catherine and Mr. Verney were in some way mixed up in it. I did not go to sleep again till the sun began to stream in through the eyes, lighting up the weird corners of the room. Then superstition fled and reason once more resumed her sway. I told myself that the ghostly tapping at the door was caused by some derangement of the

latch, and registered a vow that I would blind the eyes in the shutters by stuffing them with paper before the next night, lest in the dark my imagination might again prove stronger than my reason. Then I fell asleep.





CHAPTER IV.

"O'er all there hung the shadow of a fear;
A sense of mystery the spirit daunted,
And said, as plain as whisper in the ear,
This place is worse than haunted."

I WAS awakened by a rap, too sharp and decided to be dealt by any ghostly fingers. I called out, "come in," and Catherine entered, looking, if possible, lovelier in the morning light than she had looked the night before.

"Not up yet, you lazy thing!" she cried. "Do you know how much we have to do to-day? I'll give you just half an hour to dress, mind, no longer, and if you're not ready when

I come back, I'll—" she shook her little forefinger at me, and disappeared.

I got up, but before I had finished dressing I heard her singing on the corridor, and then came a series of fantastic little taps at the door.

"Little torment," I murmured, then aloud, "I'll be ready presently," and in a few minutes I joined her. She took my hand and danced downstairs to the room where we had had tea last evening. Old Donal was there, busy arranging the breakfast things, and grumbling to himself all the while in a way that wonderfully resembled the snarling of a vicious dog.

"Now leave those things alone," cried Catherine. "You might have had all that done long ago, only you're such a spiteful old fellow that you always contrive to be here

when I come down, because you know no one could have good luck after seeing you the first thing in the morning. But you're foiled this time, I have seen Miss Melville first. Now go, mind your clocks, and see if any of them want to be boiled," and she pushed him out of the room.

"Mr. Verney won't be down yet, Grace, so we'll have breakfast now, and when he comes we'll just go through the form of taking it; that's all I ever care to do indeed when he's here. We can't have tea, though, because it hasn't been brought up yet." She poured out some milk for herself and me, and having spread a slice of bread with sugar, sat down on the hearthrug before the fire.

"Are you fond of sugar, Grace? If you are, you can take some."

"No, thanks. You will have the tooth-

ache some of these days, Catherine, if you use it that way."

"Oh, no fear, I never have a toothache."

Mrs. Baker had come into the room unperceived by us. On turning towards the door I saw her standing there shaking her head at Catherine.

"What a queer young lady you are, Miss Catherine," said she. "You're not a bit better than a baby, sitting there on the hearthrug, eating bread and sugar, and chattering like a magpie. Miss Melville must be quite shocked at you. I wish you could learn her quiet, sensible ways."

Catherine started up, and seizing me round the waist whirled me round and round till my head grew dizzy.

"If she's shocked, she may as well be

shocked more," cried she, releasing me at last. Then springing to Mrs. Baker, she pushed her cap awry, thereby giving to the respectable old housekeeper a most rakish appearance.

"There now, you stiff old woman, don't shake your head any more at me, if you please, and don't let me hear you wishing again that I may learn any one's ways but my own," and she attempted to whirl her round as she had me. But the wary old lady, perceiving her design, took such a firm hold of the table that she found it impossible.

Catherine's efforts to loosen her grasp were nearly bringing the breakfast things to the floor, when suddenly her merry laughter ceased, and exclaiming, "Mr. Verney is coming," she darted to the table, and began

to rearrange the cups and saucers, while Mrs. Baker, pulling her cap straight, slipped out of the room.

When Mr. Verney entered, Catherine was seated demurely at the table. I saw him fix his eyes upon her face, with a sinister expression in them, but he said nothing, though I imagined from Catherine's shrinking look that she expected he would. He did not even say good morning to her, nor did she to him. I said it, however, and he, of course, replied.

During breakfast the silence was oppressive. Mr. Verney read the whole time. If Catherine or I spoke to each other, though in ever so low a tone, he instantly looked up and fixed the offender with his glittering eyes. When breakfast was over Catherine stood up to leave the room; for a moment

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she lingered outside the open door, where Mr. Verney could not see her, and beckoned me to follow her. I did so in a few minutes.

“Now, Grace, I am going to show you over the house,” said Catherine. But first, I must run and get the keys from Mrs. Baker.”

She flitted away, returning in a moment, dancing a bunch of rusty keys on her fairy finger.

“You had better tuck up your dress, or it may be caught by a rusty nail; besides, the rooms are full of dust,” said she.

I took her advice, and we proceeded on our tour of investigation, through long corridors and winding passages hung with cobwebs, where our footsteps echoed strangely, and our voices sounded unnatural.

The atmosphere was damp and vault-like.

Though the sun was shining brightly, it shed none of its rays into those gloomy galleries, and I shivered with cold.

Catherine flitted before, like a stray sun-beam, that, more hardy than its comrades, had taken courage to steal in. Sometimes she would disappear mysteriously, leaving me standing perplexed among the various turnings and windings, not knowing which she had taken, and calling, "Catherine, Catherine, where are you?" When suddenly she would spring out from some recess where she had concealed herself, startling me by her abrupt appearance.

The rooms were all much alike; large, gloomy, oak-panelled, full of dark corners. They had all the same enormous grates, the same creaking doors, in which the key seemed reluctantly to turn, the same deeply-indented

windows—for, though narrow outside, the windows widened inwards, forming deep recesses in every room.

The furniture of the bedrooms was much like that of mine; there were the same temple-beds, the same old-fashioned oak chests and high-backed chairs.

“We have but one more room to visit now,” said Catherine.

She led the way through a gallery shut in by a heavy oak door—which completely cut it off from the rest of the house—to the western and ruined wing. This gallery was very dark, and much longer than any we had yet traversed.

Whilst in it, so thick was the door, that we could not hear a sound of life from the other part of the house. The silence was like that of a vault, and so was the air.

It was so strewed with bricks and slates which had fallen from the walls and roof, that it was almost impassable; but Catherine skimmed lightly over them. There were no rooms on either side, as in the other corridors, but at the end I saw, through the darkness, a door. It was not locked, and flew open noiselessly at the first touch, then closed again as quickly and noiselessly.

There was a rustle, a sound like hurrying feet, as we entered, and then a whole army of mice scampered across the room, directly in front of us, stopping us till they passed.

We were in a long, narrow apartment. On the walls hung several pictures, mostly portraits; on the floor, half eaten by the mice, lay more. Half-broken statues stood in the corners, and totally broken ones were scattered about.

The place seemed to have formerly been a picture gallery, but was now filled with lumber and *débris* of all sorts.

I walked towards the window and, entering the deep recess, gazed out.

None of the windows commanded a beautiful view, for the house was sunk in a valley, surrounded by marsh and moorland; but the view from this window was more dreary and desolate than from any other.

To the right, stretching away boundlessly, lay the ocean. To the left, an expanse of brown bog, apparently as boundless. No mountains were visible to break the monotony of the scene; nothing for the eye to rest upon but the ocean, the dreary waste, and a vast extent of grey sky. No sound to stir the stillness but the mighty, monotonous, never-ceasing roar of the invading giants

rushing to their fate, and the weird wailing of the wind round the house and through the apertures in the roof.

I felt that if I were to be shut up here for one week, with nothing to gaze at but this view, and nothing to listen to but these sounds, I should be mad when released.

I turned from the dreary, dreary scene, and looked again round the dreary room.

The ceiling was remarkably lofty, and quite smooth, except in one part, where four deep lines like cracks—only I never saw cracks so accurately defined—were traced exactly in the shape of a door.

“Is there any room over this?” I asked Catherine.

“There is the turret chamber,” she answered. “The turret is directly above this room; but it is in too ruined a state even for

us to visit. I never was in it; it has been blocked up as long as I can remember, and the stairs leading to it are broken away, so there is no way of getting up."

Glancing down from the ceiling to the floor, which was of white stone, my eyes fell upon several dark red stains directly under the mark as of a door in the ceiling; they looked like blood.

I felt myself grow pale and shudder involuntarily. I turned to Catherine, but without speaking.

"Yes, they are blood," she said, answering my look. "Nobody ever told me so, but I know it, I feel it, and so do you, I see by your look. Mrs. Baker says they are red paint, and scours continually; but it is useless, for no scouring can wash away blood."

I was about to beg Catherine to take me away from this weird place when my eye was attracted by a picture hanging on one of the walls.

It was the portrait of a young lady, apparently about two-and-twenty. The likeness to Catherine was remarkable. The hair was of the same golden colour; the eyes, deep fathomless wells, with the same mysterious light in them; but no glad sparkle played even on the surface. They were intensely sad, appealing eyes. The face was gentler, sweeter, more timid-looking than Catherine's. It had the expression which is best to see in a woman's face, the pure, unselfish tenderness, the womanly dignity, the loving dependence—the look of one who would be sure to make a faithful devoted wife to whomsoever she might

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marry, and a self-sacrificing mother to her children.

There was not too much passion in it. The sad, quiet eyes had none of the restless fire which I had seen flashing in Catherine's last night, when she had talked of wishing to mix in the gaities of the world. The mouth, though like hers in shape, was not wilful and pouting. The face was that of a true and good woman. There was nothing of the sprite about it. It was equally beautiful, perhaps even more beautiful than Catherine's, in its sad and saint-like purity.

"That is my mother," said Catherine, in a low, subdued voice, almost a whisper. "I never saw her—at least to remember; she died when I was a few weeks old. I don't know how she died, or anything about her, but I am certain that this room is in

some way connected with her. Perhaps those crimson stains on the floor are her blood ; that she did not die a natural or quiet death I know. There is some mystery about it. I have often asked Mrs. Baker questions, but she always gives me evasive answers, yet I am sure she knows it, and also the origin of these stains. The one story would explain both, I think. She might as well tell it to me, it could not be worse than what I imagine sometimes. It was here that my mother met her fate, whatever it was, and here I, too, shall meet mine, unless I can escape from this place before the appointed time comes. The crisis which will decide it either way—whether I shall escape, and so avoid the fate waiting for me here, or remain to meet it—is not far off, I know, because of late my mother has come to me oftener than she used. In

the dead of the night, when I am asleep, she comes, for it is only in dreams that she can make herself visible, at least as yet. She holds up her hand, and looks at me, sometimes warningly, other times beseechingly. I see Cecil standing in the distance, with arms outstretched towards me. My mother points to him ; her looks seem entreating me to fly to that shelter. She appears to warn me of terrible consequences if I do not. I see her lips moving, but I cannot hear the words, or, if I do, I cannot remember them when I awake."

She said all this in a low, awe-struck undertone, and more as if speaking to herself than to me. I looked at her. She was very pale, and I thought her eyes had a strange, spirit look in them, as of one who had held commune with the dead. A superstitious

terror suddenly seized me. I hastily walked towards the door, and opening it, rushed along the dark gallery. I did not feel safe till I stood once more in the daylight, with the oak door between me and that mysterious room. Then I stopped to rest and recover myself.

A light touch on the shoulder startled me, and turning quickly, I saw Catherine. She had quite recovered her usual appearance, and was smiling as gaily as if those strange boding words had never passed her lips. Looking at her, I could scarcely believe it real that she had uttered them, and that the whole scene in the ruined chamber was not a dream.

“Come, Grace, and get ready for a gallop across the moors. Are you a good rider?” said she.

"I'm not very well used to riding," I answered.

"You'll not be long so, then, for I love it, and you must always accompany me."

We did not, however, go out riding that day. The sky had become overcast by heavy black clouds, and before we were ready the rain was descending in torrents, and continued so to do till towards evening. So I devoted the day to unpacking and arranging my things, assisted—or rather hindered—by Catherine, who chattered incessantly, and commented on every article separately. We were interrupted by Mrs. Baker, who came in to say that Mr. Nugent was downstairs. Catherine started up from the floor, where she had been seated before a trunk, deep in the delights of rummaging, and every now and then holding up a ribbon or a brooch

to admire it extravagantly, or condemn it as extravagantly.

“Oh, I must change my dress,” she cried, “I got this one all torn in the morning,” spreading out a great rent. “I’ll leave it for you to mend to-night, Mrs. Baker.”

The housekeeper went away, shaking her head at the torn dress, and Catherine flew off to her own room. She returned for me after a few minutes, and we went down together.





CHAPTER V.

CECIL NUGENT.

ON entering the room I saw, standing near the fire, leaning one arm carelessly on the mantel-piece, a gentleman, apparently about twenty-eight or thirty, tall and erect in figure, presenting a striking contrast to the bent form of Mr. Verney, who stood beside him. The face was one that you felt instinctively you might trust; and with his thick, chestnut-brown hair, magnificent beard, and hazel eyes, Mr. Nugent might fairly be considered a handsome man.

It has always been a habit with me to form my judgment of people's characters from first impressions. This is generally considered an unjust and incorrect mode, yet I have seldom found occasion to alter, very materially, the opinion formed at first sight. On the contrary, I have often found the impressions received at the first meeting to have been more correct than those of a later date. The impression I received of Cecil Nugent was, that he was a good man, possessed of some of the finest qualities, perfect honour, unflinching courage, both moral and physical, tenderness, delicacy, refinement. In his manner to women there was a peculiar deference—a deference which, I felt sure, would be extended to all women, young and old, rich and poor alike. Yet, for all that, Cecil Nugent was not faultless, who is ? The fault of Cecil Nugent was evidently

pride. I saw it in the curve of the delicately chiselled lips, in the full hazel eyes, in the manner in which the finely formed head was set upon the shoulders, in the erect, stately carriage, in every motion, in every tone, in every opinion expressed. If any stranger had been asked what struck him as the chief characteristic of Cecil Nugent, he would have unhesitatingly answered *pride*. Yet it is possible that Mr. Nugent himself was not conscious of this. Had you told him that he was proud, he would, most likely, have disputed the fact. The pride of Cecil Nugent, was, however, of a very different nature from the poor, paltry, self-seeking arrogance, so often confounded with true pride, a fault certainly, when carried to excess, yet a noble fault.

Having introduced me to Mr. Nugent, Catherine retired to the window recess, where,

kneeling upon a chair, she appeared to watch the setting sun, and, though Mr. Verney left the room after a few minutes, she still continued in the same position, neither looking at, nor speaking to Cecil Nugent, whose eyes, I observed, often wandered to her. I thought this strange, as she had seemed so glad on hearing that he had come, and had talked of him so much that it appeared as if he were scarcely ever out of her mind. On entering, I had noticed that she hardly even shook hands with him, pulling her fingers away almost immediately from his with a petulant motion.

“ Oh, Cecil,” she cried, suddenly from the window. “ Guess who are coming up the avenue, Mr. and Mrs. Preston, mounted on King ; William and Queen Mary. Oh, what shall we do ? Such odious bores ! ”

“Prepare yourself, Miss Melville,” said Mr. Nugent, “to hear the names of those royal personages very often. Mr. Preston’s favourite hero is King William III.”

I approached the window, and saw, riding up the avenue at a short trot, a lady and gentleman, both elderly. The gentleman was small, thin, and wiry-looking. The lady, large, stout, and comfortable, with a rosy, good-natured face. She was not in riding attire, but wore her usual dress, and a wide-leaved, somewhat drooping straw hat, tied under her double chin with broad ribbon strings.

In a few minutes Mr. and Mrs. Preston entered the room. The latter came in talking, having, apparently, begun her greetings before she opened the door.

“I declare I don’t know how long it’s since

I saw you how d'ye do Catherine my dear," stopping for a second to kiss her, and then going on, gaining speed as she proceeded, like a steam-engine, jumbling sentence upon sentence, and question upon question, not waiting for a reply to any—interrupting you in the middle if you endeavoured to answer, repeating what you were going to say, all wrong, and then starting off on another topic before you had time to utter a word of disclaimer.

“ We've been intending to come over for ever so long but one thing or another always came in the way just as we had arranged to go one time it was the weather then it was King William hurt his foot then it was Queen Mary wasn't well and last week Mr. Preston had a cold himself which I declare I don't know how he got but this morning

as we were sitting at breakfast I said to him
‘ we’ll just go over to Verney Court this evening if it’s fine so we will’ but down comes the rain just as I was in the kitchen after the breakfast making a macaroni pudding very nice steep the macaroni all night though some say that spoils it and give only a few hours but I don’t believe it and I ought to know so I ought boil for a few minutes with good milk and flavour to liking I’ll give you the receipt if you like because I can’t trust Bridgid to make anything she’s so stupid all Irish servants are declare I wish I could get an English girl so I do perhaps the young lady from London could recommend me one thought I’d come over and ask and make her acquaintance—but I declare I forgot to shake hands with Mr. Nugent—Catherine and I were so busy talking or maybe I did but it’s

no matter a good thing can't be done too often how did you get over Mr. Nugent rode of course did your horse get stuck ?”

“ No, I walked—” he began.

“ Oh yes of course you walked your horse it was the wisest plan I declare that's what I often say to Mr. Preston ‘take him gently don't go too fast mind his feet and he won't get stuck,’” interrupted the impatient lady.

Mr. Nugent had been about to tell her that he had walked over, not ridden.

“ This is the young lady from England, I suppose ?” asked Mrs. Preston, looking at me, and, wonderful to relate, pausing for a reply, partly, perhaps, to recover her breath, for she sat down fanning herself with her handkerchief and “ declaring ” she was “ as warm as wool.”

Catherine introduced me.

“ Nice genteel name that's what it is no-

horrid O to make you ashamed great drawback one can always know an Irishman anywhere by his name and a Papist by his face that's what I say I declare their faces have a different look from other people's so they have," remarked Mrs. Preston.

"I suppose your family were all English, Miss Melville," said Mr. Preston.

"My family were Irish, and I was born in Ireland," I answered.

Mrs. Preston had turned to Mr. Nugent, and continued her speech to him, which, as it proceeded, seemed to treat, indiscriminately, of all subjects under the sun, from the state of the weather to the state of politics and religion, and appeared as if it could never come to an end, one subject ever suggesting another.

"Well, it's a pity one of your parents, at least, or some relation, was not English,"

said Mr. Preston ; “ it gives one so much consequence, d’ye see. But never mind, if you don’t tell, you may pass for being English. Nobody would ever guess from your voice and manner that you were not, and you may rest satisfied that Mrs. P. and myself will keep your little secret. You will never regret having confided in us, I assure you.”

What did the man mean ? I had confided no secret to him or Mrs. Preston. I had simply mentioned that my family was Irish.

I soon, however, discovered that Mr. Preston was one of those Irishmen, of whom there are too many in Ireland, who think it the finest thing in the world to be English, and consider it the greatest compliment which can be paid them if they are mistaken for English.

Though, in reality, both he and his wife were

essentially Irish, yet he always maintained that his character, tastes, and ideas were peculiarly English.

“As for me,” he continued, “I am Irish merely by the accident of birth.”

“Your father, I suppose, was an Englishman?” I said.

“No, not just my father.”

“Your grandfather, perhaps?”

“Well, not exactly.”

“Your great-grandfather,” suggested Cecil, an amused smile playing about the corners of his mouth.

“No, I can’t say he was, either; but I’m English for all that, d’ye see. There’s not a drop of Irish blood in me. An ancestor of mine, who came over from England with William III., of great, glorious, pious, and immortal memory, was the first of the family in Ireland, and he received the estate which

I at present hold, as a reward for his services."

Our conversation was here interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Verney. And soon after tea was brought in, the dim lamp lighted, and the heavy oak shutters barred across the windows.

During tea, and after, the conversation turned upon politics and the state of the country, which was disturbed at the time.

Mrs. Preston had become much quieter since Mr. Verney came in. She no longer interrupted in her loud, cheery tone, but contented herself with carrying on in an undertone, to Catherine and me, a running commentary on all that was said, contradicting, agreeing, "declaring," and telling confused stories, which she thought illustrative of the matter in hand—as if in reply to the person who was speaking.

I felt some curiosity to ascertain what part my guardian would take in ordinary conversation, as, in fact, I had scarcely heard him speak at all as yet.

The light in which he now appeared did not, however, influence me any more in his favour. The opinions expressed by him were of a singularly harsh nature. Nevertheless, they showed a good deal of intellectual power, and the coolness with which he enunciated them formed a striking contrast to the excitability of Mr. Preston, whose views, even had they not been in themselves grossly bigoted and prejudiced, were expressed in such absurdly strong language that it was impossible they could command respect. He could hardly listen with patience to Mr. Nugent, whose opinions were marked by that large tolerance which ever distinguishes the thoughtful man who

has read much, and seen much of the world.

“The reign of King William III., of great, glorious, pious, and immortal memory, was the golden age of England, d’ye see!” cried the excited little Orangeman, starting up to utter that magic name, with its four attendant adjectives, and administering a kick to Catherine’s pet kitten which, in opposition to his favourite hero, she had named King James.

The animal ran for protection to the shelter of Mrs. Preston’s ample skirts, from which haven of safety, with raised back and tail stiff as a poker, he glared upon his adversary.

“Nasty beast!” muttered Mr. Preston. “It’s my belief,” he continued, walking excitedly up and down the room, and darting his fiery little black eyes from one person to

another. "It's my belief that if things go on like this we shall have an inquisition in the country at last! Once give a Papist an inch and he'll take an ell; that's the genius of Popery. I tell you," becoming in his excitement somewhat incoherent, "we shall all have our beds cut in our throats!"

"Our throats cut in our beds," corrected Cecil.

"Ay, ay, of course, that's what I said. Or be dragged off in the dead of night by men in black masks, and left to die in some cursed den! In my opinion, the penal laws should never have been abolished. Sure, Ireland would be entirely a different country now if that splendid code of laws had continued! It would be a Protestant country, instead of the poor, miserable, bigoted place it is, d'ye see?"

"I must confess I do not," said Cecil.

"D'ye see, Miss Melville?" pouncing suddenly upon me.

"Not exactly," I replied.

"D'ye see, Mr. Verney?" appealing to him, as a last resource.

"I see that it would be well if there were laws against all religions," answered Mr. Verney. "They're all alike a mass of humbug, fit only for fools and children."

"I declare I think that's very wrong so I do," murmured Mrs. Preston.

"See, it's time you got your things on!" cried Mr. Preston; "it's ten o'clock. How awfully the wind has risen! It blows a hurricane. We should have gone an hour ago. We've a long ride before us, and it's not safe to be out late these times. One might get shot from behind a hedge by some rascal, who thinks it the height of injustice to ask him to

pay his rent. The state of things is enough to make one wish, like the old Roman Emperor, that the whole set had but one neck, that they might all be hanged at once, and done with ! ”

“ I declare that would be very cruel so it would I wouldn’t like to have lived under that Emperor at all banish to Siberia quite sufficient that’s what I say and establish Scotch and English colonies in their place England ought so she ought,” observed Mrs. Preston.

“ Will you accompany us, Mr. Nugent ? Your way is ours for some time, and there’s safety in numbers,” said Mr. Preston.

“ You forget that I do not ride home,” answered Cecil.

“ Oh, yes, I forgot, but I’m sure Mr. Verney will lend you a horse. If you walk, you will not be home till midnight, and the storm is

increasing ; besides it's really dangerous, the way is so lonely."

"I do not think it is in the least dangerous," said Cecil, "and I shall take the short cut through the fields, which will bring me to Hazelgrove in less than an hour."

"O, Lord !" ejaculated Mr. Preston, "one might be murdered there three times over, without a creature hearing a sound. Good-bye, my dear friend, good-bye. 'A wilfu' man maun gae his ain gate.' But remember when a ball whizzes round your head, that I advised you against it."

Cecil smiled. He did not believe there was any danger, but even if he had, I think he would have gone all the same. He was one who would prefer to risk his life, rather than forfeit the smallest particle of his freedom of action.



CHAPTER VI.

“ That night, a child might understand,
The De'il had business on his hand.”

AFTER the Prestons had gone, Mr. Verney went to his study, Cecil lingered a while to speak to Catherine, who all the evening had sat doing nothing and saying nothing, looking the picture of demureness. She now started up, and unbarring the heavy shutters, looked out. The sky was intensely dark, with great moving masses of clouds, that seemed to hurry along, as if bent upon accomplishing some purpose while it was yet their hour. The storm was indeed becoming terrific. I had been listening to it for the last hour,

before others seemed to heed it. I had never heard anything like it in my life.

“How fearful!” I exclaimed, as a gust more tremendous than any hitherto, tore round the house, and the Atlantic roared, as if it were threatening to rush in and sweep us away, house and all, oceanwards.

“Yes, it is a great storm, even for this spot, the head-quarters of storms,” replied Cecil.

“It is splendid!” said Catherine, whose strangely flashing eyes and flushing cheeks seemed to show that the wild unrest of the elements found an answering voice in her breast, “only it is not half stormy enough for me. I’d like to stand on the very highest mountain, just over the sea, and hear the wind roaring and shrieking louder than the loudest it ever roars and shrieks, and see the waves boiling, and swelling, and frothing,

and struggling like—like—what I have never seen, or anybody has ever seen, and to feel as if the earth were going to be rooted up, and blown away into space !”

“ Oh, Catherine, that would be dreadful !” I exclaimed, shuddering at the picture she had drawn. What waves can you conceive greater than the Atlantic billows on a night like this ! Listen—”

“ Look, look,” she interrupted. “ What light is that ? Do you see it ?”

“ It is some ship in distress,” said Cecil. “ It can’t be very far out, and there, that was the report of a gun. I must bid you good-night, ladies, and go to see what assistance can be rendered.”

Catherine wanted to go with him, but he told her to remain where she was, and prepare to receive some of the shipwrecked company, if Mr. Verney would give per-

mission. But Catherine was restless and dissatisfied.

"There's not the least chance of Mr. Verney permitting any one to come here; he'd sooner let them lie on the ground," she said, after Cecil had gone, as she stood at the window, listening to the guns, which now came booming across the raging waters in rapid and sharp succession.

"I can't stand this any longer, Grace," she said at last, "I must see what is going on. Why should I stay here? Cecil may be exposed to danger, and, besides, I want to see the ship tossing on the waves, and the people, if they're saved. I will go down to the shore."

"You must let me go with you," I said. We wrapt ourselves in shawls, and without bonnet or hat—for any such appendages would only have been blown off the moment

we crossed the threshold—ran down the avenue.

As we approached the shore, we saw a little group collected there, and above the tempest, heard Cecil's voice, loud and earnest, as if he were persuading or encouraging his listeners to something. As we came still nearer we saw him. He was standing in a boat; his hair blown about his face; his eyes sparkling, his features lit up with animation. At intervals his words reached us.

“Come boys, come along. An Irishman never yet shrank from danger. Will you be the first to do so? Can you stand by, and watch human creatures perishing before your eyes, without making an effort to save them? Come my lads, five pounds to whoever will come with me!”

But no response came from the little group. It did, indeed, seem like rushing headlong into

the jaws of death, to venture on that raging sea, and even the hardiest of those present shrank from an undertaking that appeared as rash as useless.

"I must, then, go alone," continued Cecil, a little impatience in his tone.

"Don't go! Don't go!" cried the crowd, with one voice, "your life is more valuable than any in that ship."

"Don't go! Don't, for my sake!" cried Catherine, but her words were lost in the roar of the wind, the thunder of the waves.

Suddenly the little crowd gave way, and a figure came rushing through it. I recognised the young peasant who had driven me over to Verney Court.

"Wait a minute, your honour, wait a minute," he cried, breathlessly, "I'm comin', Shane O'Reilly's comin'. Don't think I waited to be axed twice. The moment I heerd you,

I shouted out, ‘comin’, comin’, your honour, comin’,’ an’ here I am.” With a loud hurrah he sprang into the boat.

“That’s my brave fellow!” cried Cecil, clapping him on the back, and, plying their oars, the boat shot forward.

The group on shore watched it eagerly, with murmured ejaculations. Catherine gazed on it, her blue eyes dilated, her rosy lips parted, uttering alternate exclamations of hope and fear. I could not speak, but I inly prayed that the God, who upheld the sinking apostle, would uphold that frail boat.

Now, elevated far above the level of the ocean, trembling on the pinnacle of a wave—now, down in a fearful abyss, where the dense black mass of waters rose like a wall on either side, hiding it from our view—it seemed as if every moment it must be overwhelmed; but firm and skilful hands held the

oars, and brave, dauntless hearts, unparalyzed by fear, guided them.

The minutes that we watched seemed like hours. At length the ship was reached. The people crowded to the side. Now, stern determination is needed, for the boat cannot accommodate more than the half of them, and all struggle to enter with the fierceness, the selfishness, of men fighting for their lives. The weak are tossed back, or thrown down; the strong triumph—oaths, curses, prayers, and shrieks mingle with the tempest. But above the fearful din, rises Cecil's commanding voice, calm and firm. At first he is unheeded, but his determined refusal—which we see from his gestures—to allow any one to get into the boat till there is quietness, soon has effect, and the fierce struggling ceases. Only one is allowed to enter at a time, for a rush might sink the boat. It is quickly filled, too

quickly, alas ! for some still remain on the wreck. Cecil seems to be addressing them. Whatever he says causes them to stand calmly aside, all except one man, who seems wild with fear ; his actions are those of a madman. It appears to require all Cecil's strength and Shane's to hold him back from leaping into the already crowded boat, which his insane efforts have nearly overturned. When they push off without him, his voice rises in such a shrill scream of agony and despair, that the words he utters come borne wildly on the wind to our ears, " Let all be saved, or none," and, stooping, he seizes a piece of broken mast, and is about to hurl it into the boat to sink it, when he is dragged back.

Tossing from billow to billow like a feather, the boat now shoots rapidly towards us. The rowers seem straining every nerve. Soon they are safe on shore. Catherine is clinging,

laughing and crying, round Cecil's neck ; the people are grasping his hands and Shane's, almost weeping with joy and thankfulness that the ocean has returned them their beloved master. Their pent up feelings are gushing out in words, when Cecil interrupts them, with a smile.

"Keep your congratulations, my good friends, till we have completed our task. It is time now we should set out again ; minutes will not speed very quickly to those who are waiting our return."

"Return !" cried everybody, in horrified accents. "You will not venture again on that raging sea. Oh ! don't, for heaven's sake !"

"Arrah, sure we must," said Shane. "We promised to go back for them, the craythurs, an' would you have us break our promise ?"

“Let us go instead!” cried several voices, but they were unheeded.

Cecil shook his hands free from the grasps that held them, and loosening Catherine’s arms from his neck, imprinted a kiss—it might be the last—on her lips. Then, deaf to all entreaties, and heedless of their own exhaustion, he and his brave comrade leaped into the boat, and grasping the oars in their hands, already blistered with the exertion of rowing in such a sea, surrendered themselves once more to the mercy of the winds and waves.

At sight of their deliverers, a cheer arose from the wreck, which was answered back by Shane.

The crowd on shore, now augmented by those who had been saved, again watched with fearful interest—eyes strained, breath

suspended. It was a dreadful sight. I gazed till my eyes grew dim, and I could not discern the boat from the dark bounding billows. My head grew dizzy, a faintness began to creep over me ; I covered my eyes, and knew only how it sped by the exclamations of those around.

“Holy Virgin! that big wave went right over her. She must be full o’ wather.”

“Yes, there’s Shane balin’ it out wid his cap.”

“Where’s the boat at all? I can’t see it.”

“Nor I.”

“Nor I.”

“Marciful heaven! it has gone down, it has sunk! There’s not a speck of it to be seen! Wirra, isn’t it awful dark?”

“Let another boat be got. Bill Malone has one, run. We’re all willin’ to go now.

We don't mind if we're dhrowneded tryin' to save Mr. Nugent an' Shane. Oh, wirra! why did they go at all?"

Several were rushing away to get the boat, when a joyful shout arose from those who remained.

"There it is, there it is, God be thanked!"

"Where, where?"

"There, near the ship. Shane's wavin' his cap to tell us they're safe. Hurrah! hurrah!" and they raised an encouraging cheer, while the women waved their coloured handkerchiefs. But ere the glad shout had quite died away on the wind, a fearful cry arose from every voice, "It has overturned!"

"It has overturned! Look, Grace, look," shrieked Catherine, tightly squeezing my arm, which she held.

I tore the shawl from my face, and looked,

but the boat had righted itself, and was bounding over the boiling, hissing waters like a frantic thing. A few minutes more, and it was alongside of the fast sinking vessel. All on board quickly left her—not a moment too soon, for just as they rowed away, an immense wave rose over the deck, and when it passed, nothing was visible but a huge, black mass heaving up irregularly among the surges.

The danger was past. The boat had reached the shore in safety, and, joyful at their deliverance from destruction, all quickly disembarked, except one man—the same that had made such desperate efforts to get into the boat at the first time. He lay in the bottom without making any attempt to rise, and had at last to be pulled out. When set upon his feet, he stared wildly about him from one pale, excited face to another, till his

eyes fell upon Catherine, where they rested—strange to say—with an expression of horrified surprise. Having gazed at her for some minutes, he suddenly threw himself on his face, and tore at the sand as if he wished to bury himself in it.

“I am in hell,” he howled out, “in hell! and my torment is to be the vision of her reproachful face before me for ever and ever—the face of her whom I robbed of happiness, and sent to the grave before her time! I was the cause of it! I did it for a little money, for money that’s of no use to me now!”

“The man seems to have gone out of his senses with fear,” said Cecil, contempt mingling with his tone of pity, for the coward’s distress was the only kind with which his benevolent nature had no sympathy; he could not comprehend it.

“He is drunk,” said one of the passengers. “He did nothing but swallow brandy from the time the storm began.”

“Get up, man, can’t you,” said Shane, approaching, and shaking him rather roughly. “Sure, it’s in Ireland you are. If you don’t behave yourself, we’ll think you weren’t worth riskin’ our lives for.”

But the man pushed him away with his feet, and pressing himself closer into the sand, while he tore it up more desperately, screamed out in tones of frenzied terror—

“Off, off, let me go, fiend! I know you want to throw me into that boiling sea of flame, but I’m not the murderer—I didn’t murder her—or him. Keep it for the murderer! Keep it for the murderer! Off, off, I say!”

“Arrah, man, sure I’m not a fiend. Look about you, an’ you’ll see it’s human craythurs

we are, every one. Sure it's jest an omadhaun you are to think you're in that nasty place I'm not goin' to name, when it's Irish voices you hear spakin' round you. Sure oughtn't that to be enough to satisfy you that it's in a Christian counthry you are? It's not wid an Irish brogue the gintlemen there 'ud be spakin'—no, bedad! it's wid a fine English accent they talk, I'm thinkin'! Get up, can't you," and with a powerful effort, Shane dragged him to his feet.

His face was ghastly, and bathed in perspiration, and he stared fearfully around with red, terrified eyes.

"I don't see *him*, the murdered man, or the murderer," he muttered. "But there *she* is again!" he screamed, as his eyes lighted on Catherine. "Why do you look at me with those reproachful eyes? He employed me to do it; look at him."

“By gor! but you’re the noisy chap entirely,” said a voice from the crowd, and old Donal issued forth. “I jest like to know who ye are, an’ where ye kem from. I’d be obleeged to ye for yer card.”

The terrified creature gasped, but made no reply.

“Ay, ay! now he’s got a fiend to dale wid in airnest, Donal, the demon,” whispered the people.

“Oh! now ye haven’t a word to say,” went on Donal. “Very well; if ye continny so it’ll be the betther for ye, for if I hears ye pratin’ any more the way ye war, I’ll jest pitch ye, body and bones, into that say that ye thinks a say o’ flame, an’ that’ll soon put a stop to yer bawlin’.”

While Donal thus addressed him, the man’s senses seemed gradually to begin to return

to him. He passed his hand several times across his forehead, and a more rational light came into his eyes.

“Then, if I am still on earth, why do I see *her*?” he said, in a tone of stupefied wonder.

“Musha! why wouldn’t ye?” snapped old Donal. “Sure, that’s Mr. Verney’s daughter. Where on airth ’ud she be but on airth, ye king iv asses?”

“I believe I’ve been raving,” and, as if wishing to avoid further observation, he shrank away, and stood at some distance, with his knees drawn closely together, looking a very miserable object.

Quietness being thus restored, Cecil began to make arrangements about the accommodation for the night of the shipwrecked people.

“I fear Hazelgrove cannot accommodate

so many guests at such a short notice," he said. "Perhaps Mr. Verney will oblige me by receiving a few."

"No, he wont," broke in old Donal, rudely, "Verney Court's not an asylum for dhrownded rats. Ye can make yer own place one if ye like, but, barrin' this quare chap, that I'll make my own property, our's shan't recave a cussed sowl o' them."

Cecil looked annoyed, but he seemed to think that it was useless to appeal from Donal's determination.

"Sure, your honour, as many as likes can come wid us, an' welcome," said several voices at once, Shane's among the number.

"I don't doubt your will, my friends, but how can you accommodate them?" said Cecil.

"Aisily, your honour," replied Shane.

“Sure, wouldn’t it be betther for them to sleep on clane straw, wid nothin’ at all to cover them, than at the bottom o’ the Atlantic, wid the big waves for blankets?”

“Yes, yes, that it would!” cried the people who had been saved from that fate.

So it was settled that some should go to the cottages of the peasants, and the remainder to Hazelgrove. When the strange man, whose behaviour had created such disturbance, was told that he was to accompany Donal, he refused in a sulky obstinate manner, saying that he would prefer stopping at one of the cottages. But no one seemed willing to have him, till, at last, Shane, in consideration of the man’s apparent dislike to go with old Donal, volunteered to take him, which he did, in spite of Donal’s black looks and growls of dissatisfaction.



CHAPTER VII.

HOW HAZELGROVE WAS LOST AND WON.

THE morning after the storm, the sun was shining brightly, and the Atlantic billows rolled lazily in, as if tired after last 'night's exertions, bearing with them fragments of the wreck their late fury had caused.

I rose, feeling unrefreshed, for my second night at Verney Court had been as restless as the first. The visitors of the evening, and the excitement of the storm and shipwreck had driven away the strange apprehensions which had been haunting my mind since going to the ruined chamber in the morning.

But, when alone, that dreary room shut in with the oaken door rose before me—the dark stains on the floor, the sweet, pictured face, with the sad appealing eyes, and Catherine's mysterious words, which kept ringing in my ears till the cold moisture started to my forehead.

Why was the picture of Catherine's mother thrust away there among the litter? What dread mystery was there connected with that room? What sort of a home was this that I had come to?

Then the thought of the man who had been saved from the wreck occurred to me, and—wild as seemed the idea to associate the stranger whom the storm had cast on this coast with any mystery at Verney Court—I at once and involuntarily did so. The horrible words he had uttered—evidently no mere ravings, but rather the outbursts of a

guilty conscience that believes all lost—his strange terror at sight of Catherine, and the old steward's desire to get possession of him ; everything pointed to his connection in some mysterious and inexplicable manner with the very subject that was disturbing and perplexing me.

That day, Catherine and I went out to ride. On leaving Verney Court, the first object that met my eyes was this man. He appeared to have been standing still, as if watching for some one. On seeing us, he slunk away, with a half-stupid, half-terrified glance at Catherine. Daylight did not show him in a much more favourable aspect than amid the terrors of the storm. He appeared to be now, as then, in a state of partial intoxication, and his eyes were watery, his step feeble and uncertain, like an habitual drunkard's. A wretched, broken-down look-

ing creature he was, all the dignity of manhood crushed out of him by that enemy of the human race—strong drink. He seemed to be about fifty years of age.

As he sneaked off, Shane O'Reilly came up.

"By gor, Shane!" said the man at the lodge, who stood at the gate, "that's in an' about the downest-looking chap I ever seen. Faith, maybe it's an informer he is! His looks 'ud jest do for that same."

"And one would fancy he thought I was a rebel in disguise, from the way he stared at me," said Catherine.

"Yes, Miss, jest. I'd have liked to have knocked off his head last night for his impudence. Musha, Shane, it's a pity you didn't lave him on the wreck, the cowardly spalpeen!" said the man, as he closed the gate and went in.

"He isn't a very pleasant guest for you,

Shane," said Catherine. "Did he treat you to any more of his strange ravings last night?"

"Oh! faith, Miss, I've heerd enough o' his ravin', an' too much."

A dark shade crossed the brow of the young peasant, and I thought he spoke in a singularly significant tone. Then, half-muttering to himself—

"It's ill keepin' the black saycrets o' other people, an' suspectin' a person that must be met day after day, an' that has enough on his sowl to answer for, God knows, widout the guilt—" He broke off abruptly. Catherine was looking at him curiously.

"What do you mean, Shane?" she asked, "did that man tell you anything?"

"Avoch, Miss Catherine, is it spake of it to you I would? put the dark suspicion into the heart o' the—" Again he stopped, and,

breaking into an uneasy laugh, said, "I b'lieve that raving's takin'. Don't throuble yourself, Miss Catherine, there's nothin' wrong, I've heerd nothin'. It's only that quare fellow that's upset me a bit wid his odd goin's on."

He seemed anxious to move away, but Catherine still detained him. He, however, only repeated that there was nothing wrong, not to mind anything he'd been saying. "Somehow, nonsense seemed to come to his tongue this morning."

I glanced at Catherine as we rode along, and saw that she looked thoughtful.

"Shane is becoming mysterious, too," she said. "Mr. Verney, Donal, Mrs. Baker, all mysterious, and now he must be so."

Then, tossing back her bright hair with an impatient gesture, she began to talk to and caress her pony with childish gaiety.

We were now entering the village, which consisted of one straggling street. All the inhabitants, Catherine told me, were Mr. Verney's tenants.

It was a wretched place, the cabins in a most miserable and torn-down condition. On a wet and stormy night, the shelter of such places must have been indeed a mockery. The doors of many of them were totally gone ; those of others swung half off their hinges, or lay across the threshold. The tiny window retained no remnant of glass, but was stuffed with rags and broken bottles. I observed that some were almost entirely destitute of furniture, even the rudest.

Troops of half-clad children played about, or amused themselves making mud-pies in the middle of the street, and occasionally a slatternly woman emerged from one of the

hovels, bearing a large iron pot filled with potatoes, which she strained in the channel. Fierce, sulky-looking men lounged idly about, and stood collected in groups round the door of the little *shebeen*, engaged in earnest and excited converse, which ceased suddenly, in every case, as we drew sufficiently near to hear their words.

On leaving the village, the huts scattered here and there over the country were, if possible, yet more wretched. They were erected, some of them, in the most desolate spots imaginable, standing in the centre of a gloomy bog, or on the side of a barren mountain. I noticed several totally ruined and uninhabitable, the blackened walls and scorched grass around showing that fire had reduced them to that state. Accidental fire, I then thought, though I wondered at its frequent

occurrence. I asked Catherine for an explanation.

“Old Donal burns them,” she replied, briefly.

The answer astonished and perplexed me, but I afterwards learned that it was the practice of the demoniacal old man, Donal, if any of the tenantry were not ready with their rent when the day for payment came, and he found difficulty in getting them to quit, to set fire to their dwellings at the dead of night. It was doubtless concerning some atrocity of this kind that the men in the village had been talking so excitedly as we approached.

Suddenly the appearance of the country began to change—to change as completely as though we had entered a new region. Neat, comfortable cottages appeared in sight, surrounded by well-kept land. Instead of the ragged; neglected children I had hitherto

seen, tidily-dressed, smiling little creatures now came along, holding books in their hands, as if returning from school.

No groups of discontented-looking idlers lounged about; all seemed industriously employed. The women and girls, in their picturesque costume of scarlet petticoat and white or check shawl fastened over the head, sung as they worked in the fields.

"We have left Mr. Verney's property, and this is Cecil's we have just entered upon," said Catherine. "There is Hazelgrove."

I looked in the direction to which she pointed, and there, on the slope of a mountain, surrounded by mountains, stood the house, commanding a magnificent view of moor and meadow, fertile valley, desolate waste, and grand blue ocean, flecked with white foam.

What a contrast to Verney Court! There,

all was dreariness and desolation ; here, though wildly picturesque and romantic, the scene was neither dreary nor desolate.

The roar of the ocean, subdued to a gentle murmur by the distance, had the effect rather of soothing than exciting.

How bright and peaceful a scene it was ! A spot where one might well pause in life's weary journey and rest content, far from the bustle and din of the restless city. I should never have wished to leave such a place for a single day, I thought, yet Catherine, whose home it was to be, was longing for the tinsel gaieties of the world.

Beautifully laid-out grounds surrounded the house, spreading up the mountains almost to the peak, and sloping down to the base. Yet one thing was wanting to make the place perfect—trees. Though named Hazelgrove, there were no hazels. I observed, however,

a great number of young plantations covering the sides of the mountains, and round its base.

“Hazelgrove seems rather an unsuitable name for a place so destitute of trees,” I remarked.

“Yes, but it was once suitable,” returned Catherine, “before Mr. Crawley took it, and cut down all the hazels. Cecil planted others when he got it back, but it will be a long time before they grow up.”

“Who was Mr. Crawley? Was Hazelgrove let to him?” I asked.

“No, of course not; he took it,” she answered, looking surprised at my question. “Oh, don’t you know?”

“No, indeed, the fame of Mr. Crawley and his achievement had not reached me,” I replied.

“How funny! You know Mr. Nugent,

Cecil's father, went abroad—this was long, long ago, before I was born, or you—and for years he never wrote, and nobody heard anything of him. Every one thought he was dead, and the steward, Crawley, took possession of the place. He was a wicked tyrant like Mr. Verney, and all the people hated him. He had been in possession for some time—I don't know exactly how long—when Cecil's father suddenly came home. Crawley wouldn't give up the place, so Mr. Nugent began a law suit, and gained it. But, the evening after his success, as he was returning home, he met Crawley, and the sight of the mean wretch put him into such a passion that he got down from his horse, and, with his whip, gave Crawley such a beating that he left him for dead. After that, Mr. Nugent had to leave the country, and Crawley took the property once more. Mr. Nugent could not

come over to Ireland again to engage in a second law suit, because he knew that if he did, Crawley would prosecute him for the beating. But before he died, he charged Cecil to get back the estate; and so he has, though it wasn't easy. But he was determined, and when he was old enough, he went to America, and never rested till he had made money enough to go to law.

"There now, you have heard the whole story. Come, let us have a gallop, this cantering is dreadfully tiresome."

She started off, and was soon out of sight, as I could not follow at the same pace. When I reached Verney Court, I heard her voice calling to me from one of the ghostly galleries, to join her.



CHAPTER VIII.

SOUNDING MRS. PRESTON.

AFTER the shipwreck, the solitude of the place had been enlivened by the presence of strangers, but in two or three days all were departed, with the exception of Edward Lloyd, or "The Man of the Wreck," as the people called him.

As the days passed on, strange to say, I did not become better acquainted with the characters of those around me than at first. I was just learning sufficient of them to be aware that I did not understand them at all. Mr. Verney and his daughter were both

enigmas to me, which I felt quite unable to solve. Sometimes when I thought that I was beginning to understand Catherine a little, she would do or say something which showed me that my conjectures had been quite wrong, and left me as completely in the dark as ever regarding her.

Mr. Verney grew more and more incomprehensible, and more and more obnoxious to me, the longer I knew him. His manner to Catherine, his only daughter, shocked me inexpressibly, not for its harshness, but the taunting, jibing mockery of its tone, far more shocking—coming from a father to his child—than the extremest severity. Yet not to this, or even to the dark suspicions that had been aroused in my mind concerning him, could I altogether attribute the horror I had conceived of Mr. Verney, for I had experienced it from the moment I felt the touch

of his hand, and encountered the glare of his hyena eyes.

Her father was the only person Catherine seemed to fear. The old steward, she openly laughed at and defied, though he was an object of fear to so many. It seemed strange that the gay, beautiful Catherine could be the daughter of such a man as Mr. Verney. As she flitted hither and thither about the gloomy old house, her light footstep echoing through the ghostly corridors, her golden head making

"Sunshine in a shady place,"

she reminded one of a sprite or a fairy. There was, indeed, much of the sprite about her. She was a strange, wayward being—this beautiful Catherine, ever changing of mood, full of capricious fancies and wild whims, a creature hard to fathom or under-

stand. At first, I had thought her all frankness, and innocent childish gaiety, vain and frivolous, selfish perhaps, too, but open and undisguised as day.

Soon I came to know that the picture had a dark, as well as a bright, side. Her behaviour in the ruined chamber, on the morning that she showed me over the house, was the first indication I had of it. She would take fits of sullen, dreary gloom, out of which it was impossible to arouse her. A word would sometimes send her into one of these, and she would remain in it for hours, often days, then come out of it as suddenly, seize hold of me, whirl me round and round in a gay dance, and be her bright, merry self again. When in such moods, her favourite resort—although at all other times she shunned it—was the chamber in the old wing of the house. There she would curl herself up in

the wide, oaken window-seat. When the harsh, spring weather made the cold of the uninhabited room too piercing, she would crouch beside the broad, blazing hearth in the housekeeper's room, her blue eyes fixed upon the fire with a sullen, passionate stare, her full, rich lips pursed into a discontented pout. If I, or any one else, spoke to her then, she would either not reply at all, or only in snappish monosyllables.

At such times, the place seemed more weird and dreary than usual, and I felt very desolate and unhappy. It no longer appeared strange to me that Catherine was Mr. Verney's daughter. I even thought I discerned a likeness between them. I wondered much what could be the cause of these despondent fits. Had Catherine any secret sorrow? But, after a while, I began to guess, from the nature of the things that generally caused them, what

Catherine was thinking of, and longing for, at these times. She was thinking of the gay world that lay beyond those dreary moors and barren mountains, and longing, with all the wild, passionate energy of her untamed nature, to mingle in its pleasures, to receive the homage and admiration which she well knew would be paid to her, and for which her spirit thirsted, literally panted after. What did she care for the wild grandeur of this mountain scenery? Pleasure and excitement were what she was longing for, to see the world and the people who lived in it, to be admired, to enjoy life. She felt her youth and beauty wasted in this western wilderness, longed to escape from it, and at times seemed to despair of ever doing so. Strange presentiments of evil, and of some dreadful fate in store for her if she did not soon succeed, appeared to trouble her, too, I fancied, from

I said to Catherine, on the second Sunday after my arrival—the first having been so wet that to stir out was impossible.

“The church we attend!” she repeated, as if surprised. “We don’t attend any church.”

“Is it possible that there is no church in the place?” I cried, shocked at the barbarism I thought I had discovered.

“Oh, yes, there is, but Mr. Verney never thinks of going, and neither do I.”

“But you will come with me, Catherine, will you not?”

“Oh, no, thank you,” she answered. “I was only ever in a church once, many years ago. Mrs. Preston took me, but I believe I fidgeted so, and gave her such trouble that she resolved never to bring me again. I remember I was terribly tired before the service

was over. I thought the prayers never, never would have an end, and I've no notion of undergoing it again. So you must just set off by yourself, if you want to go. You'll see the Prestons there, and have them part way back with you."

Then the idea struck me that here was the opportunity I wanted. I resolved to go.

The walk was a long one. The church was most romantically situated. It was a plain building, small and square, with slated roof, but the walls were completely covered with beautiful ivy, which gave it a picturesque appearance that it would not otherwise have possessed. I heard afterwards that Mr. Ellis, the rector, was thinking of having the ivy taken down, because, he said, the singing of the birds among it distracted the attention of his congregation.

Immediately on entering, I perceived the Prestons, conspicuous among the lamentably small congregation, every one of whose heads turned round on seeing me, a stranger, enter. I am afraid I was not very attentive to the service that day. The sermon, indeed, would not have absorbed me at any time.

The clergyman chose his text from the seventh chapter of the Book of Daniel, and his discourse was all about the prophecies therein contained. The principal words that struck on my inattentive ears were—“The Beast, Little Horn, Popery, Antichrist, Scarlet Woman,” &c.

If the singing of the birds distracted the attention of the people, it was no great harm, rather the contrary. For were not they preaching a sermon, too, and one which appealed to the heart, striking its best and tenderest chords, awaking long-forgotten recol-

lections of childhood, aspirations after a better and purer life, raising the thoughts for a while from earthly cares, and soothing the tired breast to Sabbath peace?

If any good was got from going to church on Sunday, it was not from the human preacher, whose lips breathed no tender New Testament promises, but from his winged rivals, who flew direct from Heaven's portals, charged with a message of love to pour out on earth.

On coming out, I was joined by Mr. and Mrs Preston.

"That was a powerful discourse we heard to-day, Miss Melville, a very powerful discourse, don't you think so?" asked Mr. Preston.

"I dare say it was clever, but I didn't care for the subject," I answered.

"I declare I think prophesy's very inter-

esting so I do always had a great taste for it very learned man quite orthodox great thing now-a-days not Ritualistic like so many altar-cloth candles and cross round their necks and on the Bible chant the service I declare it's a great shame so it is very sensible remarks about the beast heads so full of meaning must have him over to tea buttered scones baked in a hot oven likes them better than anything sweet different from other clergymen that's what I say hope he'll give us horns next Sunday I declare I do so I do," said Mrs Preston.

I was in despair. How was I to get in what I wished ? Mrs. Preston's next start, however, gave me hope.

"How's Catherine you ought to try and get her to come with you strangely brought up that's what I often say great shame so it is."

“I believe Catherine lost her mother very young?” I contrived to put in.

For the first time in her life, I verily believe, the voluble lady made no reply, and only shook her head sadly, while she exchanged a look, that seemed to me very odd and significant, with her husband, who began to indulge in divers fidgety movements.

“Catherine showed me a picture of her mother,” I went on, taking quick advantage of the situation. “She must have been very lovely. What a pity she should die so early! Was it delicacy, or any accident—”

Alas! alas! Mrs. Preston had now recovered herself, and, snatching up my last word, like a railway porter one’s luggage, bore it off with her—whither? I hopelessly asked myself, as she proceeded in a speech longer and more desperately involved than any I had yet heard from her, and during

which I began to grow seriously alarmed lest she might, following the example of a demented royal personage, go on talking for nineteen hours without cessation. It appeared to me, listening half-dizzy, as if all the topics in the world went spinning after one another, with a touch from this wonderful and brilliant lady.

When, at last, with a gasp she suddenly pulled up, I found that I had been conveyed as far from the original subject as the North from the South pole.

We had now come to the point where our ways separated.

“Here is our turn,” said Mr. Preston. “Good-bye. I’m sorry you didn’t care for our Rector, Miss Melville, though it was a powerful discourse, a very powerful discourse. Not just suitable, perhaps, for all ; indeed, I didn’t quite take up the meaning of

all he said, myself, I must confess, but I know it was powerful, very powerful. Well, good-bye," and they dissappeared in a cloud of talk, Mr. Preston, as he walked away, calling back the last few words, and Mrs. Preston joining in a chorus of—

"Hope to see you soon come over think it will rain get home make haste."





CHAPTER IX.

"THE MAN OF THE WRECK."

I WALKED on, wrapt in thought. I felt convinced that there had been method in Mrs. Preston's madness this time, and that she knew something that she did not care, or thought it inexpedient, to tell. What was it?

Thus I pondered, till at last I woke up with a start to wonder that I was not arriving at Verney Court. In fact, I did not know where I was. I had been returning by the fields, which the Prestons had told me would be a short cut. But it was evident that I had missed my way. The scene was altogether

strange to me, and wilder, if possible, than any I had yet seen.

I was in the vicinity of a great bay, which stretched its dark, and deep indented line through the mountains that towered all around, while, at the head, one mighty giant rose above the rest, spreading out in majestic grandeur, like a king surrounded by his soldiers. As I looked around, the scenery that met my eyes on every side was grand and picturesque beyond my power of description. No sign of cultivation was to be seen anywhere. Quite bare of all trees, the scene was one of intense and utter desolation, wild and savage as ever the mind of Salvator Rosa conceived, or his pencil traced.

As I gazed with mingled feelings of terror and admiration, I thought I heard a footstep behind me. I turned quickly, intending to inquire my way of the peasant, whom it pro-

bably was, and, very much to my alarm, saw "The Man of the Wreck." I walked rapidly on, unwilling to make any inquiries of him, though I knew—as there was not a day since his presence in the place that I had not seen him about Verney Court—that he was well acquainted with the way thither. I felt sure that he was following me. I heard his uncertain footsteps and quick, gasping breath. I hurried on, though I might be going still further out of my way. I felt inclined to run, but restrained the impulse, for, after all, why should I be afraid of such a poor creature? He came up beside me.

"May I presume to inquire if you live at Verney Court?" he asked.

His voice was husky and shaky, yet I do not think he was at this moment actually intoxicated, strangely as he went on to speak. But, sober or not, he had evidently brought

himself to that state when it made little difference in him.

“I do live there,” I answered ; then added, as he had spoken to me, “but I’m afraid I’m very far from it now. I’ve missed my way coming from church.”

“Then you’ve not been long at Verney Court?” he said. “May I ask if Mr. Verney is any relation?”

I made no reply, but walked on quicker than before. He kept up beside me.

“I’m sure I beg pardon if I seem impertinent, and give you offence,” he said, in a tone of almost abject humility. “I didn’t mean it. But you’re going wrong. Let me direct you.”

I slackened my pace ; instead, however, of doing what he had said, he remained silent for a few minutes, then, in a hesitating, undecided way, said—

“ Might I request you to render me a little service? It is not much, and will give you no trouble. It was to ask this, I spoke to you.”

“ What service can I render you ? ” I asked, so astonished that I really wished to hear what it could be.

“ If you would be so kind as to—to—just give a letter to *him*—Mr. Verney, I mean.”

“ I can’t undertake to do anything of the kind,” I replied. “ What have I, a complete stranger to you, to do with your affairs? It is a singular request to make. Leave your letter at Verney Court yourself when you are in the neighbourhood.”

“ No, no, I’m—I’m—I don’t like. Oh, I’ve tried, and I couldn’t get the courage. That house—who can tell?—I know it is a singular request, but,” he went on eagerly, though

sinking his voice almost to a whisper, "if you're afraid to hand it to him, leave it where he'll get it, and he won't know who brought it. I don't wonder you're afraid; he's so dreadful. Is he changed? I heard he was *worse*. Has he the same terrible eyes? Is he so like—so like—" he pointed downwards, "the *devil*?" and the drops of perspiration rolled down his face.

"I do not know what Mr. Verney was formerly," I answered, "and," with an inclination to laugh, despite the horror I felt, "how can I tell whether he is like a personage I have never seen?"

"You can smile yet. You haven't been long enough under his roof. But wait—he takes the smiles off every face. Ah, my God! my God! he takes the smiles off the brightest faces."

“Why do you speak in that way,” I cried. “What do you mean? Tell me? Mr. Verney is my guardian.”

“Your guardian!” he shuddered. “I’ve nothing to say against him, nothing, nothing,” in a weak, fearful way. “You’ll take the letter. It’s only on a little matter of business; that’s all, I assure you. It can bring you into no trouble. If I thought it would, I wouldn’t ask you. There have been enough—enough—” he paused.

“Give it to the steward, Donal,” I suggested. “You’ll see him about any day.”

“One of his demons; Donal, the demon, they call him. And I—I—what am I? Another, another. Take the letter, young lady, I beg of you.”

“Give it to me, then,” I said, in despair, determined to end the scene at once, and this

seemed the only means, unless I rushed from him.

He slowly drew from his pocket a letter—hesitated—looked at it round and round, in a state of miserable indecision, apparently. At last held it out to me, but still holding it fast himself. As soon as I touched it, he hastily drew back his hand.

“Hist!” he muttered, “somebody coming,” and crammed it into his pocket.

I heard, to my intense relief, the sound of footsteps in that lonely spot, the footsteps of two persons approaching in opposite directions. The next instant, from one side appeared old Donal, from the other, coming out of a mountain defile—Shane O’Reilly. Both stopped in surprise on seeing “The Man of the Wreck” and myself standing in the middle of the road. Donal advanced quickly,

his weasel eyes twinkling, as if betokening mischief.

“And what may you be doin’ here, Miss Melville?” he asked.

I told him how I had missed my way.

“And she happened to meet me, and asked me to direct her,” put in “The Man of the Wreck,” deprecatingly, and stepping back a few paces, as if desirous of thus edging off.

“It’s yerself that could do it well, thin, bedad,” growled Donal. “Ye haven’t lost time gettin’ acquainted wid the way, shy as ye are o’ the inside an’ the inmates.” Then turning to Shane O’Reilly, and roaring, “Take away yer visitor. Maybe it’s not long ye’ll have the roof to cover him an’ you. Donal sez it, Donal, the demon, an’ he’s dalins wid sperrits, you know, an’ knows

everythin’,” grinning so horribly that I could almost have believed it.

“Do you threaten me?” cried Shane, indignantly. “Maybe it’s myself that could retort in your own coin. Look to yourself, Mr. Donal Dhue. If others are afeered of you, Shane O’Reilly isn’t, an’ never was, an’ never will be.”

“Ha! ha! yer impudent. Wait a bit. Donal doesn’t like to be disappointed in his fancies, an’ he tuck a mighty fancy to that chap there, ugly as his looks is. He wanted him for a comrade, an’ you disappointed him. I on’y hope bad loock won’t overtake ye for that same. Yiv the best wishes o’ Donal, the tinderrest hearted demon breathin’, that it mayn’t.”

Here I interferred to prevent the altercation from proceeding further, by asking Donal to

show me the way back to Verney Court, which it seemed as if I never, never should reach that day.

“No, I won’t,” he snarled. “Why didn’t ye stay there instid o’ goin’ stravagin’ over the counthry whin ye hadn’t the wit to find yer way back agin?”

“You ould varmint!” muttered Shane; then to me, “Sure I’ll show you the way, an’ welcome a thousand times, Miss.”

I accepted his escort, and walked beside him in silence till we got so near Verney Court that I could make no mistake.

“I’m afraid Donal is very angry with you,” I said, as I dismissed him. “I hope he will not try to injure you in any way.”

“I hope not, Miss. I must take care not to give him the opportunity, the ould vagabone! that’s all.”

“Mebbe he won’t ax ye for it,” said a

voice behind the hedge, that of old Donal, who must have stealthily followed us, taking the cut across the fields.

I walked up the avenue, feeling utterly wearied. All these dark hints, which seemed to point at something I dared not guess, were very trying, and a great weight descended on my spirits. The shadow, was it, of the giant Horror in the future, whose iron arms would yet encircle me, and helpless, and almost hopeless, I would look longingly back to this time, not altogether devoid of brightness?

That evening, after dark, there was a knock at the hall door. This was an event which always caused much wonderment at Verney Court, for the only visitors who ever came there were Cecil Nugent and the Prestons.

Their knocks were well known in the house; they were knocks which had an un-

mistakable character of their own, and this was as unlike either as could be. It was timid, trembling, of a sneaking character, consisting of a series of undecided, jerky little raps, as if the person knocking were between two minds whether he'd run away or not.

I happened to be crossing the hall when Donal opened the door, and, to my surprise, saw "The Man of the Wreck." Having enquired if Mr. Verney were at home, he handed Donal a sealed note, telling him to give that to his master. After eyeing him leisurely from head to foot, with a look of askance, Donal proceeded to do so. In a few minutes he returned, and conducted the man to Mr. Verney's study, where he remained for more than an hour.

After this no more was seen of "The Man of the Wreck."



CHAPTER X.

"Thro' light and shadow thou dost range,
Sudden glances sweet and strange,
Delicious spites and darling angers,
And airy forms of flitting change."

CECIL NUGENT came frequently to Verney Court. It was his custom to call for Catherine most days, and go out riding, so that I saw a good deal of him. From the first moment he had interested me. I thought there was something particularly noble and dignified in his manner and appearance, and all that I had seen and heard of him since had increased that interest, and made me look up to him with sincere admiration.

I had never before met with any one who at all resembled him. His conversation gave me new views on many subjects, in particular in connection with Ireland, and I eagerly availed myself of his knowledge to become better acquainted with the condition and character of my native country. I was glad to turn my mind, sometimes, from the lurking mystery in that old ruined chamber, and to forget Catherine's weird words in more daylight themes.

Catherine's conduct towards Cecil puzzled me greatly. At one time, nothing could exceed the graciousness and winning sweetness of her manner to him, at another, nothing could exceed its coldness and petulance; every slight she could think of, she showed him.

Whether she really loved him or not, and this was mere coquetry, I could not make out.

At one time, she would declare passionately that she did love him—at another, with a scornful laugh and a toss of her little golden head, say that she did not care for him, would detest to spend her life in the country, and begin to make fun of his interest in his tenantry, and exertions for their welfare—this, indeed, she often did to his face.

I saw that her behaviour gave Cecil much uneasiness, that his pride was often wounded by it, and I longed very much, sometimes, to give her a good scolding. It seemed so provoking that such a slight thing as she should have power to vex a man like Cecil Nugent.

He often talked to me about her, and wished to find out her real character. That she had many faults, he knew, but thought that they were capable of being cured, especially when she should be removed from her father. He believed that she really did

love him, in spite of her waywardness, and that he had some influence over her.

My presence at Verney Court, he said, would be a source of improvement to her, as she had now a companion of her own age and sex—what she had always wanted.

It did not seem to me, however, that I exercised any influence for good over Catherine. On the contrary, she appeared to grow more wilful and capricious. She began to exhibit the most unfounded jealousy if Cecil paid me the least and most ordinary attention, or entered into conversation with me, although forced to do so by her own petulant silence.

To stop short such conversations, and recall his attention once more to herself, she would resort to the most extraordinary measures, and play the strangest and most

mischievous tricks, utterly careless of the trouble and anxiety they might cause to others, and the danger to which they frequently exposed herself.

On one occasion, her life was nearly becoming a forfeit to her coquetry. It happened in this manner.

We were out riding—Cecil, Catherine and I. Catherine, in one of her spritish moods, had been behaving in the most provoking way to Cecil. For some time he endured it with wonderful patience, but at last it became too much, and, turning from her, he began to converse with me. For a while Catherine remained silent, as if planning what she should do. Then, looking up, she urged her pony to a brisker canter, which brought her a little ahead of us, then suddenly started off at a furious gallop. As she flew along, she

turned round in her saddle for a moment and kissed her hand, as if she were taking leave of us for the day.

Cecil at once followed at an equal pace, but she had got the start, and he could not come up with her. He called to her not to go in that direction, as a very dangerous fence, with a precipice at the opposite side, lay in the way, but she only returned for answer a peal of mischievous laughter, and flew along the faster.

“Catherine! Catherine! are you mad?” cried Cecil. “Your pony cannot take such a leap; it is madness to attempt it.”

But still on she went. The fence was almost reached. If she had wished to stop now, it would have been impossible. Nothing could be done but await the result of her rashness, and Cecil, far in advance of me, stood still to watch it. I, also, did the same.

She raised herself in her saddle for the spring, patting her pony's head encouragingly. It bounded lightly into the air, had nearly cleared the fence, when its hind legs, catching in the jagged branches, got entangled. It struggled, plunged desperately downwards, succeeded in extricating itself by a sudden effort, and leaped across.

But the danger was not past, the animal could not regain its footing on the opposite side, which was damp and slippery. It scrambled, slipped back, scrambled again. The stones and loose earth fell from beneath its feet and rolled down, down, hundreds of feet, it seemed.

At last it struggled to firm earth, and bounded along once more. Catherine turned round with a look of triumph. How she had contrived to maintain her seat, I could not imagine. But for her coolness and skilful

management she must have inevitably fallen and been dashed to pieces, with the animal she rode, in the precipice below.

To my surprise, instead of taking the road onwards, she now turned her pony in the direction that led back to Verney Court, which we had not long left, and in a few minutes entered the avenue.

When I came up, which was not for a while, she was standing on the steps with Cecil, who had joined her just as she dismounted. He was talking to her earnestly, and she, leaning on his arm, was gazing up into his face with a look of bewildering softness. They seemed to have come to a perfect understanding. So I, not wishing to disturb them, went straight into the house.

Cecil remained for the evening, at Catherine's request, and never before had I seen her so charming. The usual levity of

her manner was subdued to a sweet seriousness, which became her marvellously. She was all gentleness and compliance, and sang, with a sweet pathos, song after song of Cecil's favourites, in the dim twilight, before lights and Mr. Verney came in to break the spell. When Cecil rose to take leave, as he bid Catherine good-night, I heard him say to her—

“If you were always like this, Cathy, I should be afraid you would take wings and fly away from me.”

This softened mood did not, however, last for long. The very next time that Cecil came over to Verney Court, she played another of her elfish tricks.

All the evening Mr. Verney had engaged Cecil in conversation, for, though usually a silent man, Mr. Verney could talk a great deal, and for a long time, when he had any-

body to talk to. Me, he considered nobody, and scarcely ever spoke to, or took notice of, and whenever he spoke to Catherine, it was to snarl at her. His manner of talking was, however, so disagreeable that I preferred his taciturnity to his sociability.

At last, however, he left the room, and, as was his custom, retired to his study, or den, as Catherine called it. It was a habit of Catherine's every night, after he had gone, to unbar the shutters. She now did so, and let a flood of moonlight stream into the dusky apartment, which the lamp only faintly lighted. It was a windy night ; indeed, but for the experience I had gathered, I would have said that there was an actual storm. I had before observed that in wild weather, Catherine's mood was always particularly restless, and this night seemed to be no exception.

“How beautiful Weston Abbey must look by this fitful moonlight,” said she. “How the wind must be shrieking and whistling through its ruined arches! Let us go there. Get your hat, Grace.”

I thought she was jesting, and made no reply.

“Get your hat, Grace,” she repeated, impatiently. “Mine is hanging in the hall, and bring me down a shawl. Be off, child.”

“I am not going, Catherine, we can go to-morrow.”

“Yes, by the flaring sunshine. I love the night ten thousand times more than the day. But you needn’t come, if you don’t choose. We can go without you. Come, Cecil.”

“Oh, if you are so determined, of course I’ll go,” I said.

“I knew that would make you give in,” she returned, laughing. “If you’re afraid

Mrs. Baker will be annoyed, you needn't, because I don't intend she shall know anything about it. I'll leave the window open, so that we can get in at it, and we can take off our boots before going upstairs, that she mayn't hear us."

"But, Catherine, you know how very particular Mr. Verney is that all the windows should be fastened and barred across as soon as it is dusk."

"Who cares for his particularity? He won't find out that it was left open unless somebody comes in and shoots him, and then he can't say anything to me. Do you know why he's so anxious about having the windows barred? Because he's afraid of being shot; he's such a cruel tyrant, and makes himself so hated by everybody. Cecil doesn't bar his windows."

I was very much shocked at the way she spoke, but feeling that it would be useless to reprove her—as I knew that what she said was only too true—I merely insisted that the window should not be left open during our absence, and we set out.

The walk was a breezy one, indeed. The wind, unstayed by tree or shrub, swept across the moor with tremendous fury. We had to fight for every step we took. Catherine seemed to enjoy the conflict.

“Isn’t it delightful, Cecil?” she panted, clinging to his arm.

Cecil agreed that it was delightful.

“You are the child of storm, Cathy,” he said—that was his pet name for her. “I have heard that there was a terrible storm the night you were born, such as had not been known for years, and has never occurred

since. I think you are a gift from the god of storms."

"What would you do if some day the god of storms wanted his gift back, and carried me off in a gust of whirlwind?" said Catherine.

Cecil did not know, could not imagine what he would do.

"I know what I would do if you were spirited away!" she said.

"What would you do, Cathy?"

"Get some one else. But there is Weston Abbey."

A sudden turning had brought us full in view of the noble old ruin. Very picturesque it looked by the uncertain moonlight, one minute standing out clear and bold against the barren mountains, every pinnacle and every arch bathed in the silver radiance—the next, shrouded in deepest gloom. Catherine

darted forward, and sprang up the ruined stairs which led on to the roof.

“I’ll be back in two seconds,” she called.
“You needn’t come up, as I know Grace is in a fever till we get home.”

In a moment she appeared on the top, leaning over the parapet, and holding it to maintain her ground against the strong wind, whose power must have been fearful in that elevated position. She stood there but for a moment; to remain longer would have been impossible. Lightly kissing her hand—with an action which reminded me of the day that she had galloped away so wildly—she disappeared. We expected to see her almost instantly on the stairs, but the minutes went by, and she did not appear.

“She must be lingering about in the Abbey,” said Cecil. “Had we not better go in for her?”

We went in, but she was nowhere to be seen. In vain we wandered up and down the long aisles, and among the broken arches, calling her name ; the echoes only answered. The moon had become permanently clouded over ; the darkness of the place was intense. Catherine might have been within an arm's length of us ; and we could not have discovered her if she chose to remain silent.

"Let us go back to Verney Court," said Cecil, at last. "She will probably become frightened, and follow us. If not, I must get torches, and return with Donal to continue the search."

I gladly assented to his proposal. I felt cold as ice, and was shivering all over.

"She must be hiding somewhere in the Abbey," continued Cecil, as we left it ; "has, most likely, been listening the whole time we

were searching for her, and laughing at our trouble. I wish she would give up these tricks, and become like other women. But you must not think too hardly of her, Miss Melville; she is such a child yet in many ways. It is too much to expect one under her peculiar circumstances to be like others who have had friends and relations to guide and counsel them from childhood. She has never had any one. Her position has always been one of complete isolation from society, so that she has no idea how other women act. She just does as her own untrained and wayward nature prompts her."

I remained silent, not feeling much inclined to excuse Catherine at this particular time. Cecil's next words were different.

"Look," he said, "there is a faint light proceeding from that old shed yonder. I

have been noticing it for the last few minutes, but thought I might have been mistaken until now. Do you not perceive it?"

I did, now that he attracted my attention,—a very faint gleam that might well have passed unnoticed. We crossed over to the waste ground in which the shed stood, and paused outside. As the wind sank for a few moments, the sound of a man's voice was distinctly audible, proceeding continuously, as if addressing an audience, and the noise of shuffling feet gave further token that this was the case. There was a little aperture in the boards up high. Cecil reached it, and looked through.

"It is undoubtedly some secret meeting," he said, returning to me after a few minutes. "A number of the peasantry are assembled—my own tenantry, most of them—and a young man, a gentleman, apparently, is ad-

dressing them. I haven't the least idea who he is. I was not aware of the presence of any stranger in the place."

"Could you hear his words?" I asked.

"None connectedly. Some stray ones, sufficient to show the nature of the gathering, reached me, 'Landlords, your rights, deceptive system, smooth hypocrite,' and such like, and I thought I heard my own name pronounced. It seemed to me, from the looks and gestures of the men, that the speaker was not gaining their favour. I would burst open the door, and show myself in their midst were I alone, and but for the necessity of looking after Catherine."

As we walked on, rain began to fall, at first in large, heavy drops, then in a perfect torrent, as from a water spout. The wind seemed to blow from every point of the compass, and attacked us in front, side, and rear

with equal ferocity. Cecil did what he could to shield me from it,* but by the time we reached Verney Court, I was thoroughly drenched. We had to knock several times before being admitted. At last, the massive bolts were slowly drawn back, and Mrs. Baker peered out cautiously.

“Good gracious me !” exclaimed she, on seeing who were there. “Who’d have thought you were out on such a night and at such an hour !”

Cecil did not wait to enter into any explanation, but walked quickly across the hall towards Donal’s room.

“You’d better take off your wet things at once, Miss Melville, if you don’t wish to get a fever,” said the old housekeeper, coldly. “Well, well,” muttered she, taking up the candlestick, which she had placed on the pedestal of a broken statue, and shaking her

head till the great frills of her ample nightcap bobbed up and down in sympathy, "such a night to be out! I'm fairly puzzled to know what to make of it. And Mr. Cecil, what can he want with old Donal? Good gracious me! Near one o'clock in the morning!"

I explained how we had lost Catherine.

"Mr. Nugent is going to return with torches and Donal, to search for her."

"You may tell him he needn't mind, for Miss Catherine is fast asleep in her bed, where all young ladies ought to be at this time of night. She came to me full an hour ago to ask for a candle and bid me good-night."

"Is it possible?" I exclaimed, and ran upstairs to confirm her words with my own eyes.

Catherine was there, indeed, lying in so sound a sleep that the opening of the door did not awaken her. The moon, from which

the clouds had now passed, streamed brightly into the room, and rested upon the bed, illuminating her sleeping face.

How fair and innocent and pure she looked, slumbering so peacefully ! Her bosom gently rising and falling in pulsation calm and even as an infant's ; her head slightly thrown back, and resting on her blue-veined, dimpled arm ; her beautiful, golden hair, that no comb could confine, falling in rich, undulating masses all over the pillow, and surrounding her like a halo. To see her, one would never imagine that so angelic looking a being could be such a very naughty little mortal when awake.

I now remembered that, just as we were leaving the house, Catherine had run back to the dining-room, saying that she had forgotten her gloves. Probably this had been only a pretence for opening the window, by

which she had, of course, re-entered unknown to any one.

It had been my intention to have awakened her, but now I thought it seemed a pity, and, determining to administer a good lecture to her in the morning, I quitted the room, closing the door softly behind me.

This prank of Catherine's, trivial as it may seem, brought about a result that made me very unhappy for a long time, as will appear, and obliged me to turn from the friendship of the only one in the place whom I could trust.





CHAPTER XI.

LOST A FRIEND.

NEXT morning, beyond a slight sore throat, I was not the worse for my wetting. I spoke to Catherine about her conduct of the preceding night, as soon as we were alone after breakfast, but could make nothing of her. She began to laugh at the mention of it, and said it was to punish me for my obstinacy.

“But it gave Cecil as much trouble and annoyance as it gave me,” I said.

“Well, what do I care? he’s well able to

bear all the trouble I give him," she returned.

"But it wasn't the trouble he cared about so much as that you should have acted in such a way. Catherine, be careful how you trifle with Cecil. These foolish airs and tricks will at last tire out his patience. He said last night that he wished you would become like other women."

"Did he? Did he say that? Like what other women, I wonder," she added, after a moment's silence, during which she seemed to have been pondering over the words.

"Like almost all other women," I answered. "None ever behave in the way you do. Cecil loves you, now, Catherine, but I advise you not to presume too much upon that. If you once lose his respect, with it will go his love, never to be regained, for where he cannot respect, he will not continue to love."

I understand his character better than you do, and I warn you to be careful, lest you give yourself cause for bitter regret all your life."

"Oh, how terribly serious we are! What an irreparable loss his love would be, certainly, to such a shocking fright as Catherine Verney! for, of course, it's not within the bounds of possibility that any one else could ever care for her. She'd be sure to be a miserable old maid, and regret her conduct as she sat with a cat on one knee and a parrot on the other, 'moping beside the fire, forsaken, faded, old.' Why didn't you quote that, Grace? It would have finished off your last sentence so beautifully."

"Don't be so foolish, Catherine. . Of course, I didn't mean that no one would care for you, but it is not likely that any one so

good and noble as Cecil would, for there are not many such in the world."

"I detest good and noble men. I'd never have said I'd marry Cecil if it weren't for the sake of getting away from this place, and because I intend to make him take me to London and Paris. If he thinks I'm going to settle down at Hazelgrove, he'll find himself mistaken. A month out of the year will be the most I'll ever spend there."

"You know Cecil will never consent to live in London or Paris, Catherine."

"He must, if I wish it," she said, with an imperious toss of her curls. "Unless he prefers Hazelgrove to me; he can't have both. I know his greatest pleasure is rooting about among his tenantry, enquiring after all the sick old women, hoping 'your rheumatics are better, Mrs. O'Brien; my house-

keeper shall send you down some blankets ;' trusting 'little Pat wasn't much burnt when he fell into the fire,' and seeing that their cottages are all in apple-pie order, if this one's roof wants a new thatch, if the hinges of another's door are all right, and if a third wants the fence round his potato-field repaired, to keep out the pigs. As for his wife, he'd like her to go visiting about wherever there was sickness and fever, with a lump of camphor in a little bag tied round her neck, a basket in one hand, containing jelly, and such things, and, perhaps, a blanket or two over her arm. She ought to keep a medicine chest, and spend all her morning compounding odious doses to give out to all the people who called. Her evenings she might employ cutting out and making for the children of the same adorable tenantry. But if he thinks

he can make any such paragon of me, he's very much mistaken."

"Neither he, nor any one else, will ever make anything of you but what you are, one mass of frivolity and vanity!" I cried, roused to indignation. "You ought to be proud that Cecil goes about among his tenantry, himself, and doesn't trust to an agent—instead of ridiculing him for it. You are altogether unworthy of being loved by such a man. You cannot appreciate the treasure you have in his love. I wonder he ever cast a second thought to you; but he fancies there is something in you. It would be well if he discovered his mistake before it is too late to escape the life of unhappiness he will have with you, whose highest ambition it ought to be to make him happy."

"You had better tell him, then. I suppose

you are one of the other women he meant ?
Did he say he wished I was like you ? ”

“ He said nothing of the kind. ”

“ Well, do you know, Miss Grace, I think you would make him a much more suitable wife—more after the model I was describing when you burst out so wickedly—than I should. What do you say ? If you are agreeable to the change, I am. Ah, you are blushing. I do believe you are in love with him ! ”

I indignantly denied the charge.

“ Oh, but you are, though ; I see it by your face. Here’s Cecil coming up the avenue. I’ll tell him you are in love with him ! ”

She darted towards the door. I tried to catch hold of her to stop her, but she eluded me, and flew laughing from the room.

I saw her join Cecil. At first he received her a little coldly, but she took his hand, and

looked up into his face with an expression of such sweet penitence that he seemed unable to resist, and passing his arm fondly round her waist, they walked slowly up the avenue.

I watched them closely, trying to find out if Catherine were really saying what she had threatened. She was laughing and talking with eager animation, as if telling something, and he, bending down, appeared to listen attentively. He smiled. Was it in pitying scorn of me? The thought was insupportable. I could bear to watch them no longer, and leaving the window, buried my face among the cushions of the sofa. Was there no way by which I could clear myself in his eyes from this absurd accusation? To speak to him on such a subject was impossible. Yet why should it be impossible? Why could I not tell him just how it had occurred? gaily, laughingly, treating the whole thing as a jest

too ridiculous to be spoken of seriously. But could I? No, I felt that my face would burn, my voice falter, and my eyes droop before him, though why they should I could not guess, for I did not love him. No, that was an invention of Catherine's. She could not believe it herself. No one could for a single instant.

"Grace, Grace," called Catherine's voice, on the stairs.

I raised my head from the cushions, and smoothed my hair, but did not answer, and she rushed in.

"Come downstairs; Cecil is here. He called specially to inquire how you were after last night's wetting."

"You didn't say *that*, did you, Catherine?" I asked, eagerly.

She laughed.

"Perhaps I did, and perhaps I didn't."

“ But did you ? ” I urged.

She would not answer, but ran off, telling me to follow her. I thought it better to do so, lest absenting myself should give colour to this absurd charge. So I took courage, and went down.

I was afraid to look at Cecil as I entered. I felt my hand tremble like a leaf, as he took it, and I pinched it angrily as I drew it back. I thought I saw a laughing sprite in Catherine’s eyes, but Cecil showed no sign. His kindness and refinement of nature would, however, I tormented myself by thinking, hinder him from doing so, in any case.

He began to speak to me about the secret meeting we had discovered last night. He had gone back to the place, he said, but found it silent, and the gathering broken up. This morning he had received a letter which showed that some mischief was, indeed, going on. It

appeared to be written by one of his tenantry, and warned him that there was some one in the place who was trying to put the people against him, and impugning his motives for interest in their welfare. Cecil said that he had made inquiries about the presence of any stranger in the neighbourhood, but unsuccessfully. Whoever it was must be carefully concealing himself, and had probably taken up his quarters at some distance.

I suppose there must have been something unusual in my manner of listening and replying, as Cecil spoke, for he looked at me with a surprised and, as it seemed, perplexed glance, and said no more.

“Grace is cross this morning,” said Catherine. “Don’t think about this stupid plotter, Cecil. He is an ass, whoever he is, to plot against you, and not Mr. Verney.”

“I have too much confidence in my tenantry to believe,” returned Cecil, “that, plot as he may, he could succeed in corrupting even a single man. I assure you, I have no anxiety on that head. I would willingly trust my life to any one of them.”

I did not accompany Catherine that day in her ride with Cecil. If her threat to me had been a jealous device, whether she had put it into execution or not, it would serve the purpose equally well. Uncertain as I was, I could never be the same as formerly with Cecil Nugent.

After again seeing him two or three times, I did notice a change in his manner. It gradually became cold as my own, proud, and slightly embarrassed. Occasionally, too, I fancied that he directed a furtive glance towards me. I grew yet more cold, and soon

a total estrangement resulted. Then I became very unhappy. It was but natural that I should be so, I thought, for I had lost a friend. Yet, I could not help thinking, sometimes, that I was more unhappy than I ought to be, considering that I did not love him.





CHAPTER XII.

DONAL DHUE DEFEATED.

CECIL NUGENT continued to receive letters warning him of the presence of a secret enemy. He, however, appeared to attach little importance to them, and, about this time, some business requiring his absence from home, such was his faith in his tenantry, that he had no fears in leaving them for a time.

It was now summer. Catherine and I spent the greater part of our time out of doors, wandering among the mountains, or riding over the moors.

One day, we rambled near the spot where I had lost my way coming from church. Catherine, for the last few days, had been in a moody fit of the darkest and most obstinate description, during which she had not spoken one word, and had remained in the ruined chamber almost always, coming out only when compelled to do so for meals. This mood had lasted till yesterday, and she was now in the maddest spirits, dancing along, and carolling like a wild bird ; sometimes darting from me, and becoming lost to view till I caught sight of her sylph-like form on the side of a steep mountain, her golden hair tossing about in the breeze, as she gracefully twined long ferns round her hat. Or I would behold her on the verge of a fearful precipice, coolly stretching her hand down to cull a bunch of wild flowers that had attracted her fancy, her light song and careless laugh

coming borne on the wind, as I cried out in affright.

At last, tired with these flights, she walked more soberly beside me, and contented herself by chattering with all her might. Engaged in my own thoughts, which were troubled enough, I suppose I was not a very satisfactory listener, for she suddenly ceased speaking. I looked up, disturbed by her silence—having become accustomed to her low, soft voice going like the continual murmuring of a brook.

“I might far better talk to Brian Borohme, than to you,” said she, stooping down to caress a large dog, which often accompanied us in our walks. “Good Brian Borohme, you’re much better company than this disagreeable Grace. You look up at me and lick my hand when I speak to you, and show that you understand me.” •

"I beg pardon, Catherine, what were you saying?" I asked, rousing myself.

"I was talking about the school you were at, and asking you about the other girls there, and what sort of teachers you had, and telling you that the only teachers I ever had were Mrs. Baker and Professor Catherine."

"I don't think Professor Catherine kept you very closely to your studies," I said, smiling.

"Oh, Professor Catherine wasn't so bad as you may think. It was the Professor taught me to play the harp, and to sing and draw."

"The Professor's system didn't include much theory, I fancy."

"No, indeed, none at all, scarcely. Professor Catherine didn't approve of theory, said it was all nonsense; if you could *do* the thing, what more was wanting? Mrs. Baker-

was my first teacher. She taught me to read and write, and, whenever I learned them, heard me a few lessons. As for languages, the only one I know, besides English, is Irish, which I picked up from hearing the people speak it. As for literature, until Cecil came, Donal was my library ; and, oh ! such frightful stories he used to tell me on winter nights in the big kitchen, I, curled up on the hearth-stone at his feet, looking up into his wicked old face."

"Did he? What a shame!"

"Oh, I liked them. I used to coax him to tell me the most frightful he could think of; only, after I went to bed in my great, lonely room, they made me feel dreadfully queer. I used to cover up my head under the bed-clothes, to shut out the carved heads on the bedposts and chests of drawers, because I

fancied they were moving, and making faces at me. But here's Alley O'Reilly," as a young woman approached.

She was dressed in the picturesque costume of the country—a brown dress, scarlet cloak, and yellow handkerchief tied over her nut-brown hair, which was twisted in thick coils round her small, oval head. Her eyes, of the same colour as her hair, were large and lustrous, and had the timid, startled expression of a young deer. Her features were delicate and regular as those of any high-born lady, and her clear, olive cheek showed, glowing beneath the skin, a rich colour that might well have been envied by pale, city beauties. In her arms, half-covered by her cloak, she carried a lovely little cream-coloured baby, with eyes like her own.

"This is Shane's wife, Grace," said Catherine.

“I’m very glad to see Shane’s wife,” I replied, shaking hands with her.

“Oh! what a darling baby you’ve got, Alley!” cried Catherine, taking it from her, and tossing it into the air. “Oh! what fun it must be to have a baby! How I envy you! Poor me! I have to content myself with a kitten.”

“Take care, Catherine,” I cried, for she was throwing the child up and catching it again in her arms, much as if it were a kitten or a ball.

The young mother, who had been watching her with fear and trembling, came forward to take it, but the ungrateful little thing, in spite of the rough usage it had received, clung to Catherine, grasping firm hold of her bright hair, and crowing with delight, as if it had got hold of a great treasure.

“You see it won’t go to you,” said Catherine, “you must let me keep it. I’ll give you my kitten instead. I wonder what your husband would say to the exchange!”

Alley O’Reilly smiled, but only for a moment.

“I’m in sore trouble, Miss Catherine,” she began, her eyes filling with tears.

“Oh! for shame, Alley, and you with such a handsome husband, and this darling baby!”

“Sure, Miss, it’s for their sakes I’m frettin’ . . . I don’t mind so much for myself.”

“What’s the little love’s name?”

Alley replied that the little love was named after herself.

“Oh, why didn’t you call it after me, too? Alley Catherine, or Alley Cathleen, that would have sounded so pretty. Can’t you manage to have it added on?”

“ I’m afraid not, Miss, but I’m thankful to you all the same, an’ so will Shane be, too, when I tell him of your kindness ; that I can answer for.”

As we came out from a beautiful mountain pass, the cottage of the O’Reilly’s was before us, on the shore of the bay. Alley asked us to come inside, and we followed her in at the little gate, which, thanks to Shane’s industry, was not swinging off its hinges.

Before the cottage were spread fishing nets drying in the sun, for, besides cultivating their little piece of ground, Shane and his father went out fishing in the bay.

The cottage, outside, was less torn-down looking than most of those on Mr. Verney’s estate. Inside, it was neat and clean, and, though boasting of but little furniture, had an air of humble—very humble comfort. It was

divided into two apartments, as usual in Irish cabins. The outer one contained a table, one chair, three stools, and a wooden dresser, on which were ranged some showy cups and saucers, jugs, plates, and one or two other articles of crockery. The rough walls were decorated with a few gaudy pictures, such as are bought from hawkers, and in the little window were several flower pots, with flourishing plants growing in them. Some dried fish hung from the ceiling. A great pile of peat lay in a corner near the fire, which was burning brightly, and, beside it, in the one chair, old Miles O'Reilly was sitting, his feet resting on a little piece of old carpet. I spoke to him, but the only answer I received was, "Anan," accompanied by a puzzled stare, and pull at the front lock of his hair.

"Sure, he doesn't spake a word iv Eng-

lish at all, my lady," said Alley, "Shane an' me thried hard to tache him, but, och! we might as well, every bit, have thried to tache the cat there."

She pulled forward two of the stools for Catherine and me, and began to busy herself about the duties of hospitality, ever the first thought among the Irish peasantry, even the poorest.

"Won't you thry a little bit o' fried fish?" said she. "Shane took some lovely mackerel this morning."

"I was just goin' over to Verney Court," she continued, "to tell you about the way we're in. It's the rint that we're not ready wid. It was riz on us all of a sudden, an' we have only the same as usual, and Shane says that there isn't the laste use askin' Donal to take less nor the whole. I thought that maybe if you'd be so very kind as to say a

word for us to the masther himself, it might do some good, an' we'd be for ever grateful."

Catherine looked at her with wide open eyes.

"What can the girl mean? Me speak to Mr. Verney! as if I dared attempt such a thing, and as if it would be of any use, supposing I did!"

"Then God help us! I don't know what we're to do at all. In three days we'll be turned out widout e'er a place to go to, just as we war gettin' on so well, an' war so happy. Sure if we attempted to stop a day longer, maybe it's the thatch they'd be settin' fire to over our heads, and the ould man is so bad wid the rheumatics, an' I'm not quite strong myself since that little thing was born. Och, I don't know what we're to do at all!" and she began to cry.

"Tell us all about it, Alley," I said.
"Perhaps something can be done."

"It's very kind o' you to say so, my lady, but sure I don't know what can be done at all. If Mr. Nugent war at home, it'd be different. He'd lend the money to Shane in a moment, that he would, God bless him! But things always happen so contrairy; he that's so seldom out o' the place is out of it just at this time."

"He won't be home for a fortnight," said Catherine.

"No, Miss, an' we'll be in the workhouse afore that. Shane says he thinks Donal riz the rint on purpose to get us out. He never done it so sudden on any one afore, bad as he is. Somehow, that 'Man o' the Wreck' brought bad loock on us. Shane hasn't been himself since," lowering her tone, "and

Donal's turned so terrible black entirely. It's easy to see he's got no baby, or he wouldn't be so hard wid them as has, and—holy saints keep us! I misdoubt if he ever had a father or mother like other people," she added, in a mysterious whisper.

"How much is your rent, Alley?" I asked. "I have a little money that you would be very welcome to, and that, I think, would make up the entire sum."

She mentioned the amount, a surprisingly large one, it seemed, for such a small and poor cottage, with so little land about it.

"And I," said Catherine, who had been playing with the baby, and apparently not attending to what was going on, "I have no money, but I will give you this diamond brooch; it's the only valuable thing I have," and she took it from her neck.

"A thousand, thousand thanks, dear Miss.

Catherine. You're as good an' generous as you're lovely, but sure I couldn't think o' takin' your beautiful brooch that Mr. Nugent gev you. If I did, Shane would be very angry. You see, Miss, it's not a thing that can be ped back just as good, like money."

"But you won't refuse my offer, Alley?" I said, as I emptied the contents of my little purse into her hand.

"No, dear lady, an' I'm very, very grateful to you. We'll repay it very soon."

"Oh, don't trouble yourself about that. Such a small sum is not worth thinking of again."

"Shane is very particular, my lady; when he gets a loan from anybody, he's never asy till it's ped again, an' is more grateful for its being taken than not, because, you see, then he feels independent," she said, with a slight touch of pride in her tone.

We now rose to go. Catherine delivered up the baby less reluctantly than might have been expected. The truth is, she seemed getting tired of it.

“What a dreadfully heavy little thing it is. Oh, how my arms ache! I pity you having to carry such a load about, Alley,” said she, giving it to its mother.

“You were envying me a little while ago, Miss Catherine, and amn’t I to have the kitten, after all?” said Alley, roguishly.

“No, indeed, you’re not. I wouldn’t keep your baby for the world. It has almost broken my arm, and torn out the half of my hair. Look at the great piece it has clutched in its little hand.”

A change had come over the bright day, while we were in the cottage. It looked so gloomy, and the air had grown so sultry, that Alley prophesied a thunderstorm, and urged

us to remain longer. But Catherine would not be persuaded to wait. She always became restless when obliged to remain in the one place for long.





CHAPTER XIII.

THE STRANGER.

ALLEY'S prophecy was very shortly fulfilled. Soon after we left the cottage, dreadfully black clouds gathered over the mountains. The monarch at the head of the bay was frowning ominously, as if about to declare instant war, and all his soldiers had donned their black helmets, and assumed a threatening appearance.

Even while I looked, it began. A fearfully vivid flash of lightning leaped forth, followed, instantaneously, by a tremendous and long sustained peal of thunder, which, as it died

rumbling away, was taken up and repeated by a hundred echos, as if some unseen enemy were returning fire. I involuntarily pressed my hands to my ears, and closed my eyes, but, before either of us could utter a word, another forked tongue of fire shot out, a terrible crash resounded over our heads, as if the sky and mountains were falling. I screamed aloud; I had never heard such thunder before. When the last echo had given it back, there was dead silence.

"Come," cried Catherine, "there is an old place just here where we can shelter."

She sprang across a stile, and a few minutes run brought us to some old ruins, where we gladly took refuge.

It was grand and impressive to watch the storm, now that we were in a place of comparative safety—to hear the thunder leaping

from mountain to mountain, and crag to crag, and see the bay lit up as with phosphorus.

While the storm was still at its height, we saw a gentleman approaching at a quick pace, a stranger. As he entered the ruin, it struck me that I had seen that face before. In a moment I recollected where. It was the gentleman whom I had seen at the little hotel, on my way down, and had heard questioning the innkeeper and Shane O'Reilly about Mr. Nugent.

He did not at first seem to see us. When he did, he started slightly, then raised his hat, and, after a minute or so, made some observation about the suddenness and violence of the storm, and compared it to one that he had seen among the Alps. I replied, Catherine remaining silent. Stray remarks of a similar nature then followed, during the pauses between which, he glanced with intense,

though covert, admiration and surprise at Catherine. Seen for the first time unexpectedly, and under such circumstances, her extraordinary beauty must have struck any beholder as almost unearthly, and made her appear like some beautiful spirit of the storm. He seemed anxious to induce her to speak, but she continued silent, though her eyes had been fixed upon him from the moment he first entered, in a manner which must have seemed strange to any one not knowing what a novelty the sight of an unfamiliar face was to her, and the curiosity with which she regarded every person from that world she hoped to mix in some day herself. He was just beginning to say something directly to her, when a flash of lightning, that seemed if possible more vivid than any of those preceding, burst from a cloud immediately overhead, and a dreadful clap of thunder re-

sounding, stopped him ere the first word was uttered. After this, the rain began to descend in a torrent ; then, gradually, the flashes became less frequent and vivid, and the thunder more distant. For about half-an-hour the downpour continued unabated. But long before that time was up, the stranger had contrived to overcome Catherine's reserve, or shyness, or whatever it was, and she was laughing and talking with him as familiarly as if she had known him for as many months as she had minutes.

I now took occasion to observe the stranger more particularly than I had cared to do before. He was very handsome, and had the air and bearing of a gentleman. His conversation showed that he had travelled much, but there was a flippancy about it, a want of earnestness that I did not like ; and though his features were handsomer than Cecil

Nugent's, his face was not one which would have disposed you to trust him equally.

How little we know, any of us, when we meet the person who is to change the whole current of our lives ! How could I have imagined that this young man, the passing acquaintance of an hour, as I thought, was to exercise an influence over the fate of Catherine, of Cecil, of Mr. Verney, and of myself ?

Ah, Catherine ! if the veil that hides the future could have been swept back for a moment, displaying the scene that was to be enacted one wild March night to come, how your merry laughter would have hushed, how the light words of the stranger would have died upon his lips, and an awe crept over him at sight of the doom he was the means of bringing on the bright and beautiful being beside him, now so full of life and gaiety !

The mountains beginning to show signs of clearing, and a faint gleam of sunshine to struggle forth, I suggested to Catherine that we should proceed, and we came out from our place of shelter. Instead, however, of now leaving us, as I had expected he would, the stranger continued to talk, and accompanied us on our way, walking beside Catherine.

As we passed Hazelgrove, Catherine pointed it out to him, mentioning the name of the owner, about whom he asked a great many questions, all of which Catherine answered, and spoke of Cecil in such a way as must have led him to guess the relation in which he stood to her.

With a great appearance of frankness, the stranger told many particulars about himself, but all of an unimportant nature, which made

me suspect that his frankness was but assumed for the purpose of extracting information in return. His name, he said, was Charles Percival, and then inquired Catherine's name.

"You must guess it," she replied, "I think people's names can generally be guessed from their looks. Now, I knew perfectly well that your name was Charles before you told me."

"If that be the case, then, I must only think of beautiful names," returned Mr. Percival, gallantly, "but you should tell me the first and last letters."

"I'll tell you the first of each only—C and V."

"C, then I have the honour of possessing the same initial letter to my Christian name. Is it Cecilia?"

"No, indeed, what a horrid stiff name to fancy I looked like."

" I beg pardon. Clara ? "

She shook her head.

" Catherine ? "

She smiled.

" Now for V ; this will be a harder task,
I fancy. Vincent ? "

" No. "

" Vivian ? "

" No. "

He went through a great many more, but without guessing the right name.

" You see I can't," he said at last. " I think you might have pity on a poor fellow who never had any brains for guessing, and tell it to me. "

" Well, then, you can have it, if you like. "

She took a slip of paper from her pocket, and, in spite of my frowning, and whispered remonstrance, wrote her name on it.

Mr. Percival put out his hand, but, instead

of giving it to him, she tossed the paper into an adjoining field.

“Now take it,” she cried, laughing at his dismayed look.

A hedge of no inconsiderable height, on the other side of which was a not very shallow stream of water, separated the field from the road, so that the task she had given him was really a not very easy one to accomplish.

“Certainly,” he exclaimed. “I once got a prize for leaping; we’ll see if I have forgotten,” and, without another word, he sprang lightly over, just clearing the stream, and picked up the paper, after reading which he pressed it to his lips, and placed next his heart, then, bounding over the fence again, was beside us in a moment.

“Now your name must be guessed,” said Catherine, mischievously, to me. “Tell the initials.”

“I’m not going to have my name guessed,” I answered, with as much dignity as I could.

The young man bowed.

“Wouldn’t any one know her Christian name was Grace?” said Catherine.

“It certainly suits her remarkably well,” he replied.

“Yes, because it’s such a puritanical, proper sort of name,” laughed Catherine.

Mr. Percival smiled, and glanced at me, but I betrayed no sign of annoyance, and the conversation changed to other topics.

When we got home, Catherine would talk of nothing but the handsome stranger, whose lively manner had quite enchanted her. Whether any of her enthusiasm was assumed because she saw I did not share it, and clearly had not approved of her behaviour, I do not know.



CHAPTER XIV.

CECIL'S RETURN.

NEXT day, when out walking, we met Mr. Percival, who joined us. The following day we again met him, as if by accident, and again the next, and the next, and so on every day till the time of Cecil's return drew very near. Catherine flirted with him in her own peculiar, half-childish, half-womanish, but wholly charming manner, and his admiration of her grew more and more undisguised. I warned Catherine, but she only laughed at me.

“Which of them is it you want? I do

think it must be Mr. Percival, now," she cried.

"I don't want either," I replied. "I speak for your sake, and for Mr. Nugent's sake, and also because I don't think you are treating Mr. Percival quite fairly."

"Ah! don't pretend; it's all for Cecil's sake, and nobody else's. You are always so careful of his happiness. I do believe you'd rather he'd marry me if you thought it would make him happy, than marry him yourself, though you loved him ever so much. That wouldn't be the way with me."

"I wish you wouldn't introduce subjects that have nothing to do with what we are speaking of, Catherine," I said, rather impatiently. "I was advising you to discontinue your acquaintance with Mr. Percival."

"And I am not going to do so!"

"You know you must, Catherine, when

Cecil returns, unless you choose to give *him* up."

"Suppose I do?"

"Is it possible you prefer this stranger to Cecil?" I exclaimed.

"Oh! how can I tell? I'm sure I don't know. Mr. Percival is very amusing and lively, and he thinks me perfection, and never finds fault with anything I do or say, as Cecil sometimes does."

"That's because he loves you truly, Catherine."

"Well, then it's a bore to be loved truly," and she went out of the room humming an air.

It was at this time that the conduct of old Donal, first specially struck me as strange and unaccountable. I had observed from the first day I came to Verney Court, that he seemed to establish a sort of *espionnage* over Catherine and me, and was continually

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darting suddenly and noiselessly into the room where we were sitting, and casting sharp, suspicious glances at us, as if he suspected that Catherine might be telling me things she ought not, and wanted to surprise her in the act.

A fertile source for intrusion was the clock. He would poke his head suddenly in at the door, wanting to know what hour "we were," and when told, would generally say that was not right; the clock was a minute too fast or too slow, or would discover that the hand did not point exactly to the hour when striking, or that the ticking was not perfectly regular, or something or other was wrong, and would come in and spend half-an-hour or so rooting at it, apparently completely absorbed in his occupation, and quite unmindful of us, and talking to himself and to the persecuted clock much after this fashion—

“Faith, ye’d betther mind yerself, me lady, or ould Donal ’ll bile ye. He’s not the man to put up wid any fine airs, I can tell ye, ma’am, that he ain’t. Ah! ye haven’t a word to say for yerself. Ye want to make b’lieve ye’re dumb, d’ye? afther the row ye war kickin’ up last night. Oh, I heerd ye; it’s no use goin’ for to deny it. Ye sthruck a hundherd, ye ould termagant! ye did, ye huzzy! an’ now ye’re wantin’ to purtend wid yer round, innocent face that ye’re a respectable clock. But it’s you knows how to settle ’em, ould Donal, ay, ay, Donal Dhue they call ye, do they? There let ’em, a pratee ye care. Yiv got yer pot an’ yer fire, ha, ha! an’ ye know how to settle ’em, settle ’em.”

In this manner he would run on. But now his former watchfulness was redoubled. He seemed omnipresent, and was always

appearing when one was sure he was in quite another place. Once or twice I observed him peering out cautiously from behind a hedge, with his weasel-like eyes, when Catherine and I were out walking, accompanied by Mr. Percival. In his manner to Catherine, there was a change; it was sulky and disrespectful.

The day fixed for Cecil's return was now come. We remained in the house all that morning, Catherine saying that Cecil might call. But I suspected that she had another motive for not going out, that she did not wish to meet Mr. Percival, lest Cecil should see her with him.

The day passed over without Cecil coming. In the evening, being troubled with a headache, I went out alone for a walk, which I prolonged so much that when I returned, it was almost dark. On going into the parlour, I found Catherine there. She was sitting in

the window recess, on the floor, in a very childish attitude, her arms clasped round her knees, her chin resting on them. As I entered she started up, and faced me.

“How dare you, how dare you attempt to make mischief between Cecil and me?” she exclaimed, passionately and breathlessly. “What business had you to tell him about Mr. Percival? If you think it will be any good to yourself to put him against me, it won’t, it won’t! You had better beware what you do. There’s Spanish blood in my veins. I could be dangerous.”

She looked so, standing there erect, her blue eyes flashing lurid lightnings through the darkness.

“What can you mean by speaking in this manner, Catherine?” I said, surprised and frightened at her vehemence. “I have not seen Mr. Nugent. I don’t know what you mean.”

“You have! You do! You went out this evening for the purpose of seeing him, and slandering me to him.”

“Indeed, indeed, Catherine, I assure you that I have not seen Cecil. He cannot have said that I told him about Mr. Percival.”

“No, but he refused to say who did, and then I knew it must have been you.”

“It was not. I repeat that I have not seen him, and if I had, I should not have thought of telling him.”

She seemed staggered by the earnestness of my denial.

“I didn’t think you would, but if you didn’t, who did, then?” she said, more quietly.

“Any of the people about. Many of them have seen you with Mr. Percival, or—yes, it must have been old Donal,” I exclaimed. “You must have observed how continually

and closely he has begun to watch us of late, and how cross and rude he is, as if he were secretly furious at something."

"Oh, I never mind him; he's such a strange old being. But what interest could he have in doing so, unless Mr. Verney set him on? I know he's anxious for my marriage, because Cecil is rich, and he hopes to profit by it. He owes Cecil money, and he means to owe him more. I'll find some means of punishing Donal for his meddling, though I'm not half so angry with him as I was with you. But now I must tell you about Cecil's visit. I suppose you fancy he's vexed with me still? Come here."

She seated herself in the window recess again, and, pulling me down beside her, began—

"He came about half-an-hour after you went out. His manner wasn't very different

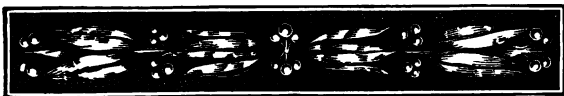
from usual, but still not just the same. At first he didn't say anything about what he had heard, but talked of other things. After a while he did mention it, though, and asked me how I had become acquainted with Mr. Percival, and who he was, and what I knew of him. I told how I had become acquainted with him, but, beyond his name, could tell nothing of him, for though he often speaks of himself, he never told me where he lived, or anything about his family, which things Cecil wanted to know. He said that I had been very wrong to continue the acquaintance, and meet a person of whose position and character I knew nothing, every day, as he had been told I did; but that he considered the worst part was my trying to conceal the whole thing from him. I should have told him of it myself, instead of allowing him to learn it from another. I think the reason he

did not speak of it at first, was because he wanted to see if I would. Well, I began to laugh and make fun of him, saying that I was not tied to him yet, and maybe never would be, and a great many other naughty, pert things. Then he became, oh, so cold and proud, and looked so stern and haughty. He said that he perceived my engagement had become a burden to me, and that, if I wished, he would release me from it. This put a stop to my laughing very quickly, and, I believe, made me do quite the contrary, begin to cry. Then he—but—at any rate, the end of it was that he forgave me on my promising to be very good for the future, and never meet Mr. Percival again.”

After this, Catherine really was very good, and matters went on better between her and Cecil than they had done before. She was much less wayward and unreasonable than

formerly, and altogether seemed to be becoming more like other women. The idea of the engagement being broken off appeared to have alarmed her. Not seeing Mr. Percival again, I concluded that she had let him know that she would not meet him any more, and that he had gone away.





CHAPTER XV.

THE SURPRISE.

THE time has now come when any stray gleam of sunshine that may have flitted across my pages, must pass away.

The night sky, on which I look out as I write, is dark and lowering. The wind is moaning restlessly like a child in pain, and the ruin in the distance looks very black. The stars have disappeared, all but one—it now is gone—a dark cloud has covered it—all is gloom, as my story must now be. The wind is rising to a tempest, and the murmur of the ocean is swelling to a roar. Will the

star shine out again? Yes, when the storm is over, but with a cloud hovering by its side, which will linger there through the night. But when the dawn breaks, and the star fades and vanishes in the blue ether, let us hope that the cloud will not follow it.

One morning, Cecil Nugent called to ask Catherine and me to ride with him to some cliffs which Catherine had often spoken of taking me to see. But now, somehow, she did not seem particularly eager to go.

"I think it will rain," said she, looking out of the window. The day was a lovely one, with an almost cloudless sky.

"If it does, it will be but a shower," replied Cecil, "and something more than that is usually required to frighten Catherine."

"I don't think I can go," said Catherine, sitting down on the sofa, and leaning her head on her hand.

"I'm afraid you are not well," said Cecil, anxiously.

"Oh, yes, it's only a headache. You and Grace can go."

"We certainly shall not leave you alone, Catherine. To-morrow, or any other day, will do as well to go to the cliffs."

"Oh, no, I want to be left alone," returned Catherine, but in a more apologetic tone than she would have used some time before, under similar circumstances. "I want to have perfect quiet, and to lie down for a while. Grace must not be prevented from going. I shall probably be asleep the whole time you are away, so I shall not miss you. But you must promise, Cecil, to come back and spend the evening with me. My headache is sure to be better by that time."

I urged Catherine to allow me to stay with her, but she persisted in her refusal. So we

set out, Cecil promising to return and spend the evening with Catherine.

I would have given anything to have avoided going, but there was no help for it. It was a long time since I had been alone with Cecil, and I felt constrained and embarrassed. To be silent was intolerable, yet I knew not what to say, and Cecil did not, as usual, take the lead in conversation. He seemed preoccupied. I felt that he was going through this ride to the cliffs as a duty, and I imagined he was wishing it were over, that he might be with Catherine again.

Nothing looked bright or pleasant, I thought, though it was the season which had most charm here, when the beautiful purple heath was in full bloom on the mountains and moors, and the desert seemed to "blossom as the rose."

The stillness around seemed almost insup-

portable. I tried to think of some excuse for turning back, in order to show Cecil that I was as much disinclined to this forced *tête-à-tête* as he was.

"I'm sure Catherine is nearly tired of her loneliness by this time," I said, at last, "and, perhaps, beginning to feel quite injured for being left alone. If we were to return now, I dare say it would be a pleasant surprise to her."

"Would you like to return?" asked Cecil.

"Yes," I replied.

"Well, perhaps it would be better to do so. You will enjoy the cliffs much more to-morrow, when Catherine is with us, than you would to-day."

We returned homewards, and arrived at Verney Court, having been absent about an hour.

Catherine was not in the parlour, and I

ran up to her room to see if she were there; but she was not, nor in the housekeeper's room, which I then tried. Meeting Mrs. Baker on the stairs, I asked her if she knew where Catherine was, and she replied that Catherine had gone out about half-an-hour before. I then went into the parlour to tell Cecil, and saying that she was probably in the arbour, he went out to seek her.

This arbour was the only place about Verney Court, that showed signs of care. It was at some distance from the house, in a remote part of the grounds. Cecil had it made specially for Catherine, who took great pleasure in keeping it in good order, and was fond of sitting there. After a few minutes, I went out also. When I had gone a little way, I met Cecil coming back. He was alone.

“Have you not seen Catherine?” I asked.

But he passed me without replying, with an expression of countenance that I can never forget. It was a mingling of many emotions, of which wounded pride seemed one, anger and grief were there also. The lips were tightly compressed, as in intense pain. It was the look of a proud man struggling hard to master some terrible emotion, that seemed almost too strong for control. I felt sure that something had happened, and walked on to ascertain what, if possible. On coming near the harbour, I heard voices, and parting the boughs, saw Catherine sitting with Mr. Percival, his arm round her waist.

For a minute or so, I stood transfixed with amazement. The expression of Cecil's face was now explained; he, too, had seen this. Then, softly dropping the branches, I hurried back to the house, but Cecil was not there, he had left after passing me.

My mind was in a whirl, I could hardly believe that my eyes had seen aright, that Catherine was so utterly false, and false to a man like Cecil Nugent. Oh, what a pity ! what a pity ! that his happiness depended on her, that she had power so to disturb him ! How dreadful to think that he was unhappy now ! and that one so utterly unworthy to occupy his mind for a moment was the cause ; one who thought it no honour to be loved by him. How his love was wasted on her ! What a waste of love there is in this world ! It is the oftenest wasted, and yet the most precious thing in earth or heaven. How many thousands are pining and sighing for it, while some who have it cast it from them, or cannot fully appreciate its value ; and the love that would be such a priceless treasure to one, is given to another whose eyes are fixed on some one else as on a distant star—

“for the doom runs through the ages—Love was never yet returned.”

For a long time I sat thinking thus, forgetting to go upstairs to remove my riding-dress and hat. At last, a light footstep sounded on the gravel walk outside—Catherine’s step—and then the window was thrown up, and she sprang into the room. On seeing me, she started and changed colour.

“What ! back so early ? Is Cecil here ?”

“No, he has gone away. We didn’t go to the cliffs. We turned back when about half-way there, and, not finding you in the house, Cecil went to the arbour to see if you were there.”

She turned very pale.

“And you know what he saw.”

She was silent for a few minutes. Then, throwing back her head, defiantly—

“I do ; he saw Mr. Percival with me,”

she said. "I don't care. I like him a great deal better than Cecil, and I'll meet him as often as I like. He says he loves me so much he couldn't stay away any longer, in spite of my cruel command. He has asked me to marry him, and has promised to take me to London and Paris, and everywhere I'd like to go; and I'm sure he must be very rich, for look at this beautiful ring he gave me."

She held out her right hand, which she had kept concealed till now. On one of the fingers glittered a splendid ring. It was of a peculiar device—a circle of precious stones, set in gold, forming the name of "Catherine."

"Isn't it beautiful? He must have got it made specially for me."

She drew it from her finger, and held it out for me to examine closer.

“Then you are engaged to Mr. Percival?”
I said.

“No, I’m not.”

“But taking the ring was a sign that you accepted him, and he, of course, considers that you have.”

“No, I told him I didn’t know whether I’d marry him or not, that I wasn’t sure which I liked best—Cecil or him.”

“Oh, Catherine!”

“Well, I’m not sure. After all, I don’t like breaking with Cecil.”

“I rather think you will not be required to break with him, that he will break with you first.”

“Oh, no! he has often been annoyed with me before, and has forgiven me.”

“But this is quite a different case. Catherine, I implore you to decide, to decide

at once and for ever, if indeed the choice yet remains open to you. Act like a rational being. Consider seriously for a few minutes, and you cannot fail to discover which you like best. You seem never to consider."

"Well, I don't think I care much"—she stopped. "But I feel as if there was a fate preventing me from giving up Mr. Percival."

"Oh! that is nonsense. Decide, without thinking about fate at all."

"Well, if I give up Cecil, Mr. Verney will go mad. Yet, if I marry him, I must live at Hazelgrove, I suppose. And Mr. Percival would take me away at once, and for ever, from here; and I should never see these dreary moors and great mountains again. I should be in the world, joining in all its gaieties, seeing people, and being seen and admired, and enjoying myself from morning till night. Mr. Percival says that I would make

a great sensation in society, and that if I were dressed for a ball, like the ladies in London and Paris, they would all sink into utter insignificance beside me. He says that the man who entered a ball-room with me on his arm would be envied by all present. And then, this ring. If I gave him up, I would have to return it; and it is so beautiful. What brilliant diamonds these are forming the letter 'C,' and what beautiful little emeralds 'a,' then 't' in amethysts, and 'h.'—are these dark red stones garnets? Look."

But I thrust aside her hand, and abruptly left the room, completely disgusted with her.

That night Catherine did not come to my room as usual. She probably knew that I would not listen to her frivolous chatter, and dreaded being teased, as she called all endeavours to persuade her to act rightly.

It was a lovely night, with a radiant moon

that shed a glory over every object, making the most common place look picturesque. Not feeling inclined for sleep, I sat for a long time at my window. When, at last, I went to bed, I let the shutters remain open; it seemed such a pity to shut out the moonlight.

I was just beginning to fall asleep when I heard the handle of the door softly turned, first one way, then the other, as if some one were fumbling at it. I started up with beating heart. The handle was again turned, this time successfully. The door opened with a creaking noise, and a slender, white-robed figure glided into the room—glided is the word, for it did not seem to walk. Without a moment's pause, it came straight towards the bed, from which I watched its every movement with dilated eyes and suspended breath. When close beside the bed, it stopped, the moonlight streamed upon the face, and I

saw that it was Catherine. She was pale as marble; her blue eyes were wide open, but fixed and expressionless. It was evident that she was in a state of somnambulism. Stretching out her hand, she laid it upon the pillow, where it would have rested upon my face if I had been lying down—and uttered one word. I did not catch what it was. Then she turned, and glided swiftly from the room.

I rose at once to follow, and see if she would return to her own room. She did not. She passed the door, and, to my surprise and horror, entered the long gallery that led to the ruined wing. I must follow of course; it was impossible to know what she might do. Lightly her little bare feet skimmed over the rubbish and bricks that lay scattered about; they scarcely seemed to touch them. Pushing open the door of the chamber at the end, she entered. Still I must follow, though trembling

from head to foot with alarm and strange, superstitious terror. The moonlight streamed in a flood through the uncurtained window, and rested upon the picture of Catherine's mother, making it stand out distinct and life-like. To my fancy, the eyes seemed to follow her daughter with a sorrowful expression. Catherine was now standing at the window. Suddenly she threw it open. I knew not what to do. She seemed as if about to jump from it. She stretched out her arms wildly, imploringly, and uttered a low, stifled cry, expressive of such intense agony and affright, that it made my blood run cold. Then her arms dropped, as in despair, to her side, and she turned quickly from the window, with an expression of anguish on her face that made her look altogether unlike herself, and rushed by me, her loose white robe sweeping

over my feet. Back through the ghostly galleries like a ghost she rapidly glided till her own room was reached, which she entered, and shut the door behind her. And I returned to mine; but not to sleep—to spend the night listening with painful anxiety lest she should again leave her room.





CHAPTER XVI.

“And now I live—Oh, wherefore do I live ?
And with that pang I prayed to be no more.”

THE next morning, Catherine appeared just the same as usual. She seemed to have no remembrance of the occurrence of the previous night. I determined, however, to speak to Mrs. Baker on the subject, and did so at the first opportunity. She looked very much disturbed when I told her.

“It’s strange, very strange,” said she, in a troubled tone. “I hope and trust it may not be a sign of anything. She used to walk in her sleep that way when she was a child ; but she hasn’t done it now these many years, and I

hoped she was quite cured of it. You said nothing to her about it, I suppose?"

"No."

"It was better not. It would only frighten her, poor child! and she doesn't have a bit of remembrance of it herself, no more than if she'd never left her bed. I don't believe she does be even dreaming at the time, for I often used to question her, not letting on that it was for any particular reason, and she'd tell me she hadn't dreamed at all that night; it might be, of course, that she had forgotten, I don't know, I'm sure. But she used to have frightful dreams, sometimes. Many's the night I've been wakened up by hearing her come running along the corridor to my room, in her little bare feet, crying with fright, and in a tremble all over, and with the drops of perspiration standing on her forehead. But, somehow, when I'd question her

about the dream, she never could tell it to me very clearly. It seemed to be more a frightful impression that was on her mind, than anything she could actually tell in so many words. It was a queer thing to see a child that way. I never liked it. And you say she went to the old picture gallery at the other side of the house, last night. It's very extraordinary. It looks just as if she'd some sort of knowledge, or feeling, that—God grant no evil may be coming!”

And the old housekeeper went about her business, sighing heavily.

The same day later, old Donal entered the room where Catherine and I were, with a letter, which he handed to Catherine with a look of fury and spite on his wizened old face. Having read it, Catherine passed it to me. It was from Cecil, and contained but a few lines, releasing her from her engagement

to him ; nothing more, not one word of reproach. I handed it back to her without making any comment.

“You don’t think he’s in earnest, do you?” asked she, after a minute, twisting the paper into a fantastic shape, but with a touch of anxiety in her tone.

“Yes, Catherine, I do,” I replied.

“Oh, no ! I’m sure he’s not ; he only wants to frighten me. He’ll come to-morrow, or next day, and then I’ll promise really never to see Mr. Percival any more, and to return the ring. Don’t you think that will satisfy him, and make it all right ? ”

I shook my head. If I had read Cecil’s character aright, he would not come again. Catherine had forfeited his respect for ever by her conduct ; he could trust her no longer. She had acted in a deceitful and dishonourable manner ; he would have nothing more

to do with her. He would consider one who had acted in such a way unworthy to be his wife.

For several days, Catherine confidently expected that he would come, but as the time wore on and he came not, she seemed to grow anxious, and would sit for hours at the window, gazing down the avenue in hope of seeing him coming.

Oh, the agony of watching for a face that will not appear! I pitied her.

One day, she came from the housekeeper's-room, crying. Mrs. Baker had told her she had heard from the housekeeper at Hazelgrove that Cecil had gone to Dublin, leaving word that he would be absent for some time.

The morning after this, on coming down to breakfast, I caught sight, among letters for Mr. Verney lying on the table, of one in

Cecil's handwriting. Catherine did not seem to observe it.

During breakfast, Mr. Verney glanced over the newspaper as usual, then he opened his letters, this one last. While he read it, I watched his face, but it was impenetrable. Having finished reading it, he looked up, and glared on Catherine in a way that made her shrink and turn pale. Then he began to read the letter aloud in a jibing tone, but nothing could take from the nobility and delicate honour displayed in every line of it—especially to us, who knew how Cecil might have stated the case if he had chosen. He informed Mr. Verney that his engagement with Catherine was at an end, and explained the reason why it was so—because she cared for another, but did not mention how he had discovered this, or her deceit.

With the most delicate generosity, he took care neither to express nor imply the slightest blame to her, and concluded by advising Mr. Verney to have inquiries made respecting this stranger, and if, on communicating the result to Catherine, she should desire it, to allow her to marry the man of her choice.

When Mr. Verney had read the last word, he stood up, and, before Catherine could start back, or I interfere, he struck her a heavy blow. Then, tearing the letter across, he threw it into the fire, with a deep curse, consigning the writer to a like fate.

“Allow her to marry the man of her choice!” repeated he, mockingly. “You may marry whoever you like—you may marry the devil for all I care—and the sooner you do it, and take yourself out of this house—where you never had any right to be—the better,” and he quitted the room.

Catherine had not uttered a single word or exclamation, either while the letter was being read, or when he struck her; but now her sorrow broke forth. She threw herself, sobbing, on the floor, in a perfect abandonment of grief.

“Nobody loves me, nobody loves me!” she sobbed out. “I am motherless, and worse than fatherless; my father doesn’t care what becomes of me. Cecil loved me, and now I have lost his love. Oh, Grace, pity me! I loved him, indeed I did, though I acted so wickedly. Oh! I wish I were dead, and at rest in my grave! Oh, that I were dead! that I were dead!”

I knelt beside her, and tried to soothe her with caressing words, as I would a child, but still she moaned out, “Oh, that I were dead!”

All day she lay so, her face buried in her

drenched golden hair. It was pitiable to see her, and to hear her mournful wail. But when dinner was announced, she rose, and went in as usual, fearful lest Mr. Verney should ask questions about her and make sneering remarks. Then she went up to her room, and lay in the gathering twilight. I followed her.

“ Oh, Grace, can't you do anything for me ? ” she cried, vehemently, as I entered. “ Can't you write to him ? Tell him how sorry I am ; tell him I'll never vex him any more ; beg him to come to me, to let me see him again, though only once. Ah ! it seems as if years had passed since I saw his face— as if I had never been anything but miserable all my life. Is it months or weeks since that letter came ? and Mr. Verney told me I might marry whoever I liked, as if there were any one I could marry but Cecil. Oh, Cecil !

dear Cecil! darling Cecil! Once my own Cecil, come back to me and forgive me! Oh! will he never call me his Cathy again? and play with my hair, and talk to me. I never knew that I loved him till he had gone—till too late,” she dwelt on the last words with sad emphasis, though I always felt different with him from any one else. He seemed to have power to create a soul within me that without him had no existence? Oh! what shall I do without him? Oh! what shall I do? Oh! if the past could come back, how differently I’d act!”

When night came, it was with great difficulty that I persuaded her to go to bed. She wanted to remain on the floor all night. I stayed with her, sitting beside her bed, till at last she sobbed herself to sleep.



CHAPTER XVII.

THE RING.

ALL next day, Catherine's grief continued, and she unceasingly wept and reproached herself, and wailed for the dead past that could come no more, breaking out every now and then into the mournful cry, the refrain of all her lamentations, "Oh, that I were dead!" as the utter uselessness of her sorrow seemed to flash across her mind. For she well knew that Cecil's determination to give her up was final.

I, also, knew it. If I had thought that his

love for her still existed, I might have written to him, letting him know her state. But it was clear, both from his letter and the knowledge I had of his character, that his love was at an end, that the sight of her falsehood and deceit had been its death-blow, though for years, perhaps for ever, "the marks of that which once had been" would remain, and he must deeply suffer; but marry her now, he never would; his pride had been aroused in all its strength.

My doubts as to whether Catherine had loved him were now over; it was evident that she had, though uncertain herself of the fact till she lost him. What she had said about his having power to create a soul in her, had been scarcely too strong an expression. If she had surrendered herself to his influence, instead of always struggling against it, he would have so guided and developed her

nature, that it might be said he had given her a soul.

It is strange that intellectual men almost always bestow their love on beautiful, soulless Undines, instead of on women more their own equals, who could sympathise with them in their pursuits.

The third day, to my surprise, Catherine rose apparently in her usual spirits, and went out to meet Mr. Percival. This, however, did not make me think that her grief had not been sincere, or that she had really forgotten it already, for hers was a nature which could not long sustain the pressure of any emotion, more especially grief. If she had not been able to rise from it, she must have died or gone mad. And, besides, her great object had always been to get away from her father and Verney Court, and now her only chance of doing so was by marrying Mr. Percival.

This, at least, was the way I read her conduct.

That day, she appeared at dinner, with the ring on her finger.

It was old Donal's business, awkward as he was, to attend at table; and seldom a day passed that he did not contrive to do some mischief, great or small. If he did not break a dish or tureen, he broke a plate or tumbler. Passing Catherine and me, he always managed to get his foot caught in our dresses, and, stumbling, would be sure to let whatever he had in his hands fall to the ground, when he would stand still, looking at it, and muttering curses on its "contrairyness" for falling, instead of on his own awkwardness for letting it fall. In consequence of these constant breakages the dinner service at Verney Court presented a very motley appearance, the broken articles never being properly matched when

replaced. Donal's destructive propensities in this way had earned for him, in addition to his two appellations of Donal Dhue, and Donal the Demon, that of Donal the Destroyer.

On this special day, Donal had been particularly careful, having broken only two glasses and one plate. But, passing down the room—fortunately without anything in his hand—he contrived, in some extraordinary manner, to catch his foot in the ends of the tablecloth, and was dragging it, and all on it, after him out of the room, when Catherine made him stop while she untwisted it from round his foot. Some knives and forks had fallen, and she stooped to pick them up, leaning one hand on the table while she did so. The action attracted Mr. Verney's attention to her, and his eye rested on her hand with the ring sparkling on the fore-finger. The in-

stant his glance lighted on it, he started violently, as if he had seen a spectre's hand lying on the table ; his face changed to a ghastly pallor, and a look of horror and surprise passed between him and old Donal, whose eyes, following the direction of his master's, had sought and found the cause of his emotion, and were fixed on Catherine's hand. Seizing the decanter which stood beside him, with trembling fingers that could hardly hold it, Mr. Verney filled out a tumbler of wine, and drank it off at a draught. The old man shook in every limb, and the expression of his face was horrible. Mr. Verney ordered the table to be instantly cleared, and Donal proceeded to obey with palsied hands. When he reached the door, carrying the tray, which he always piled dangerously with everything on the table—

making what Catherine called a lazy man's load—his trembling hands refused to hold it any longer, and it fell from them with a terrible crash which made Mr. Verney start up with a curse, and brought Mrs. Baker and the servants running, with loud exclamations, to see what was the matter. But Mr. Verney would not allow them to enter, and pick up the broken china. Kicking aside the pieces which lay in the doorway, he shut the door, bidding them "begone about their business." Then he called his daughter to him.

"Where did you get that ring you have on your finger?" demanded he, with stern, though trembling, voice.

"Mr. Percival gave it to me," she replied.

Whereupon, he burst into a violent rage. Fear and perplexity seemed mingled with passion.

“Where did he get it? tell me that?” he cried, shaking her roughly by the arm.

“I don’t know; I suppose he bought it,” she answered.

“He didn’t; he never bought it. He must have gone to hell for it!” he shouted out, in a voice hoarse and indistinct with rage. “Show it to me,” and he tore it from her finger so violently, that she cried out with pain.

“Yes, it’s the same,” he said, examining it closely. “There is the slight flaw upon the middle emerald in the letter ‘a.’ Leave the room this minute; I see you can tell me nothing.”

“Won’t you give me back”—Catherine was beginning, timidly.

But he roared out—

“Leave the room,” and she was obliged to obey. I, of course, followed.

“He wants to keep my ring,” she said, half crying, as we went upstairs. “But he shan’t; he has no right to it. I’ll tell Mr. Percival.”

Mr. Verney and old Donal remained shut up in the dining-room together for about two hours. Catherine kept a close watch on the door, running out every minute she heard a sound to see if it were being opened. Her curiosity had been much excited—as indeed mine had also been—by Mr. Verney’s sudden and extraordinary emotion at sight of the ring, and old Donal’s evident fright.

At last, we heard the door open, and Mr. Verney and Donal both came out. Catherine flew to look over the bannisters. After a minute she returned to tell me that Mr. Verney had retired to his den, and old Donal had gone out. He was absent for about an

hour. When he returned, he went straight to Mr. Verney again, and remained closeted with him till past midnight.

Catherine and I did not go to bed till he came out. Then we heard Mr. Verney turn the key in the door, and he must have stayed there all night, for I did not hear the door unlocked, or him come upstairs, though I lay awake for a long time.

I could not have been asleep for more than an hour, when I was awakened by the peculiar creaking noise which the opening of my door always produced. As I unclosed my eyes, I saw Catherine enter, and a cold shudder passed over me at the thought that perhaps the frightful scene of a few nights before was going to be enacted again. But I was relieved from this fear by hearing her speak. She was not walking in her sleep.

“ Grace, are you awake ? ” she whispered.

“ Yes, what do you want ? ” I answered.

“ Oh, I have had such a frightful dream, and I’m afraid to stay in my own room alone ; it seems full of whispering voices. Grace, you musn’t go to sleep ; I want to tell you the dream. It may not seem so dreadful when I have put it into words. It is one that I have had repeated from time to time in different forms, ever since I can remember, but never with such strange distinctness before.”

She sat down by the side of the bed, and, glancing fearfully through the darkness towards the weird corners of the room, began—

“ I dreamt I was in the ruined chamber at night. I could not leave it, though I wished to do so. There was an indescribable horror over me, but of what precisely,

or why, I can't remember now, if indeed I knew in the dream. Suddenly I saw through the gloom, a white figure come gliding towards me with outstretched arms. The face was like the picture of my mother, and, looking towards the wall where it hung, I saw that the frame was empty. And then I saw myself, in some strange way, as if I were not myself, but another person looking on, move towards the figure, as though irresistibly impelled, and glide into its outstretched arms which closed around me, and I awoke with a feeling of suffocation."

She was shivering all over, and her dilated eye-balls shot forth strange lights.

"I can't go back to my room to-night. May I stay with you, Grace?" she said.

I could not refuse, though the same peculiar fear of her had crept over me which I

had felt twice before; first in the ruined chamber—the scene of this strange dream—the day after my arrival, and again, the night she had walked in her sleep.

Lying down beside me, she wound her arms, that were cold as ice, round me, and, after a few minutes' silence, she said—

“I had a strange dream last night, too. I thought that I was running along the moor. It was night, and very dark; I could not see where I was going, and I was pursued by a figure—a terrible figure. I knew that it was my Destiny, and I was trying to escape from it. At one time, I seemed succeeding; at another, it appeared to be gaining fast upon me. But at last I took a sudden turn aside, and then I ceased to hear its pursuing steps, and to feel its breath upon my cheek. I thought I had eluded it; when suddenly, to my horror,

it started up, grim and frightful, in the middle of the path that I had taken to avoid it, and I rushed into its arms before I could stop myself. Then the dream changed. I thought I was shut up in the ruined chamber. Spirits seemed to be all around. I heard them whispering to each other about me; and my Destiny was there. It waved its wings above my head, and seemed about to descend. I fled to the barred door. Then some of the spirits began to laugh low, but others seemed to be pitying. I threw myself against the door, and screamed with frantic desperation, and tried to beat it down with my hands, till they were bruised and bleeding; but no one heard me, or at least, heeded. Then I sank down on the floor, feeling as if I were already dead and one of the spirits that haunted the room, and though my Destiny stood right

over me, I did not stir an inch—I felt no longer afraid. And I heard the voices of the spirits—the other spirits, as they now seemed to me—chanting a sweet, mournful strain; and among them I heard a voice that I knew was my mother's, and I felt a soft, cold hand laid caressingly on my forehead, and I knew that it was hers; and a sense of happiness stole over me. Gradually, the voices of the spirits grew fainter and fainter, till they died away in a distant whisper; and the dream faded, though I still continued to sleep."

"Grace, I feel that there is some dreadful fate hanging over me; these dreams are warnings of it. The only way to escape it, is to escape from Verney Court, and I have a presentiment that I never shall succeed in doing that."

"Don't indulge in such fancies," I said.
"Dreams never mean anything."

In this way, I tried to soothe her, and at last succeeded in doing so to some extent. She fell into an unquiet slumber. But I lay awake, listening to the tapping of the door, which, on this night, seemed louder and more continuous than usual, and watching Catherine's beautiful, sleeping face, over which flitted strange expressions that I could not read.





CHAPTER XVIII.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

IN the morning, when I awoke from a feverish sleep, I found that Catherine had left my side. Thinking it must be late, I rose at once, and dressed quickly.

As I passed downstairs, I heard Mr. Verney's voice in the parlour. The tone in which he was speaking was loud and angry. I was suddenly arrested by hearing him shout out with fearful vehemence—

“You shall not marry him! I tell you that he

is the son of my bitterest enemy—of the man who dogged my steps through life to injure me and cross me at every turn—of the man I hated, as the devils in hell hate one another. My vengeance is not yet sated. He is dead now, and I almost regret that he is, because I can no longer heap injury for injury upon him. But we shall meet again in hell—if there be a hell—and I shall cleave to him and torment him through all eternity. It is no hell for him till I go there. And she whom I—. His son shall never marry her daughter ; no, though I wade through blood to prevent it ! Promise, girl ; promise, or you will repent it.”

“ I will not promise,” I heard Catherine reply, in a clear, distinct voice. “ I will marry Mr. Percival. You have told me no reason why I should not—none, at least, that

I consider a reason. If he is the son of your enemy, it is nothing to me."

She said this in a tone as if it were rather an additional argument for her marrying him than otherwise. I was astonished to hear her speak in this way to her father. She must have been completely roused before she could do so.

"Well, then, I will tell you a reason that you cannot say is nothing to you," he cried.

Then, after a minute of dead silence, during which I could plainly hear his deep breathing, he yelled out in a voice so choked and indistinct that it more resembled the roar of a wild beast than a human voice—

"I am not your father! You are no child of mine! His father was your father! Now do you say this is nothing to you?"

"Yes, I do," Catherine replied. "Nothing,

nothing; because I do not believe it. How dare you slander my mother? I see it all now, the mystery is at last explained. No baseness and wickedness is too great for you to be guilty of. I am more than ever determined now not to yield to you. I would marry Mr. Percival were it only to show you my disbelief and contempt of this story, and my scorn and hatred of you. Slanderer! wretch! monster! murderer! I defy you! The curse of a daughter be upon you! for I am your daughter."

A demon seemed to have taken possession of her. Mr. Verney had found a match in his daughter, for such I still believed her to be. Fearing for the consequences of her temerity, though he was silent, I ran for Mrs. Baker. More alarmed than even I was, she returned with me, and we both entered the room.

Catherine was standing in the middle, her slender figure drawn up to its full height, her head thrown proudly back, her eyes flashing, her cheeks flushed crimson, one arm raised, the other pressed over her heaving bosom. The attitude was sublime. She looked more beautiful in her passion than she had ever looked before.

Mr. Verney stood near the window. His face was livid. The moment that Catherine saw us, her upraised arm dropped to her side, and she flew towards us and took hold of Mrs. Baker, crying out—

“He says I’m not his child, and has slandered my dead mother. I have submitted to blows and insults from him, but I could not submit to *that*. Mr. Verney, you have lost your power over me. I am not afraid of you now, and I tell you to your face that I *loathe*

you, that I *abhor* you, though I know you are my father, for I feel your nature in me ; it struggles continually with the good nature that I received from my mother."

Mrs. Baker and I tried to stop her, but she would not be stopped.

"I *will* speak," she cried. "Don't try to prevent me. I've been silent too long. I always suspected you, *Father* ; but now I know you, and I'm determined the world shall know you, too. I will expose your wickedness. You shall be compelled to acknowledge me as your child. I will not remain in this house many days longer. I will marry Mr. Percival, and the proper proceedings shall be taken against you. He will tell me how I should act. You have more reason to be afraid of me than I of you. I know more about you than you think. I can

bring forward proofs of your wickedness. Yes ; there are proofs of it in this house—proofs of *murder*. I suspect you of being a *murderer*, and I shall accuse you of it.”

What wild, unwise words to utter—but she was doomed.

Mr. Verney was still silent, but a terrible light gleamed in his eyes ; and Catherine, apparently seized with fright at her own boldness, let go Mrs. Baker’s arm, which she had held while pouring out her denunciations of Mr. Verney, and rushing past him, ran up to her own room.

Mr. Verney walked after her, with the intention of continuing the scene there, I thought ; but I was mistaken. We heard him turn the key in the door, and as he came down he said to Mrs. Baker, with an attempt at a smile—

“I shall be obliged to keep that young lady under lock and key till she comes to a better mind, and promises never to see again that person she calls Percival.”

Then he went to his den, and rang the bell for Donal.

Left alone, Mrs. Baker and I looked at each other for some minutes in silence. At last I said—

“What does it all mean?”

“Oh, it’s the old story that never could be got out of his head,” Mrs. Baker answered, crying. “I assure you, Miss Melville, there’s not a word of truth in it. Poor Mrs. Verney was the sweetest, innocentest creature that ever lived. She was almost like an angel in goodness as well as beauty. Sure, you saw her picture yourself, and wouldn’t you just know from the sweet, mild look of it, the sort she

was? Ah! dear, dear! that she should have met with the fate she did!"

"What fate did she meet with? What did the words Catherine used just now mean? Mrs. Baker, you ought to tell me; it is right I should know. What are those stains on the floor of the gallery in the old wing?"

"They are her blood, her blood that cries to God for vengeance. But don't turn so pale. He didn't murder her, at least, no court would call it murder, but he was the cause of her death. Don't ask to hear any more about it. The explanation of that blood upon the floor, and the words you heard Mr. Verney speak this morning, involve the telling of a sad, sad story, which you wouldn't be the better for hearing, take my word. Let the tale of cruel wrong remain buried

in darkness. Only, whatever you think, don't think evil of poor Mrs. Verney."

"I don't think it is well, Mrs. Baker, to let anything remain a mystery which can be cleared up without injuring any one who should not be injured. One is always sure to fancy something worse even than the truth. Besides, I think I ought to hear this explanation; though Mr. Verney is my guardian, I know nothing whatever of him; it is only right that I should know something. It will help me to decide whether I shall remain here or not after I come of age, which will be in a few months."

"Whist," she whispered, "it's dangerous talking here. Donal might pass any minute and overhear what we were saying. I hope Mr. Verney won't keep that poor child shut up for long. She has a high spirit when it's

roused, and I don't think she'll give in to him very quickly. I wouldn't like myself to see her married to that Mr. Percival, for, from what I saw of him, I don't think he's much good. I wish he'd never turned his steps in this direction, and had kept the unlucky ring that brought about all this work, to himself. Come to my room to-night, when old Donal seems settled, and has done wandering up and down the house, and I'll tell you this story. It's, maybe, better, on the whole, for you to hear it, and it's only fair to her that I should fully clear her memory from the dishonour that was cast upon it."

Mr. Verney remained in his den all day till dinner time, and I wandered about the dreary grounds that were damp with rain of the night before. I could not stay in the house, or occupy myself in any way. My mind was too disturbed to read, or even to draw or

work. I could think of nothing but the stormy scene of the morning, and the story I was to hear in the evening.

When the dinner bell rang, I went in, shuddering at the thought of a *tête-à-tête* with Mr. Verney, superintended by old Donal. But Mr. Verney took no more notice of me than if I had been the chair on which I was sitting.

He seemed absorbed in thought; his bushy grey eyebrows were knitted together, and hung over his glaring eyes. Not a word was spoken during dinner. The profound silence was broken only by old Donal, who stumbled about as usual clattering knives and plates. I have said that not a word was spoken, but there was one, when Donal disturbed Mr. Verney's reverie by treading on his toes, and he snarled out a curse at him.

In the evening, I took Catherine's place at

the tea-table, and poured out Mr. Verney's tea. What a mockery of that meal, so social in most households, this was !

The meals at Verney Court were always hurried through in silence and constraint, but, of course, I now felt the usual constraint doubled, alone with a man whom I had been given to understand was almost a murderer. It seemed strange to perform this homely office for him. He took no more notice of me than he had done at dinner. He evidently regarded me only as a machine for making tea. Sitting opposite to him, I fell into a meditation, about how his dead wife must have felt and thought, sitting where I now was, and engaged in the same way. What a man to call by the name of husband he was ! But nineteen years, at least, had passed since that young wife sat here.

Was he very different looking then? I wondered, and I gazed at him, trying to fancy what he was like, and to shadow forth the face of his youth from the face before me. Was it ever free from these deep lines of care and guilt which seemed burned into it? Could these lowering eyebrows ever have been any other colour but iron grey? and the cruel, light-blue eyes beneath without the frightful hyena glare? and the bent figure otherwise than bent?

It is a strange fact—but one which has often been remarked, and which every one must have experienced—that if you look at any person steadfastly for long, no matter how absorbed he may be, he will be sure to look up, as if conscious that eyes are upon him. Mr. Verney looked up, and his eyes met mine full. What a peculiar sensation we

feel in meeting the eyes of a person whose life and thoughts and feelings are a sealed book to us.

I could not sustain Mr. Verney's look for more than a second, but his remained fixed upon me. I saw that he had suddenly become conscious I was not a machine, or, at least, that I was a thinking machine, and, remembering that I had heard Catherine's accusations, the idea had struck him that these accusations might have aroused suspicions of him in my mind. After a few minutes' scrutiny of my face, he stood up and left the room. I was sorry that I had attracted his attention to myself.

As soon as I thought it prudent to do so, I went to the housekeeper's room.

"Do you know where Donal is?" she asked.

"He's in the kitchen asleep at the fire. I went in to see if he were there before I came here," I replied.

"Are you quite sure he was asleep?" she inquired, anxiously.

"He was nodding, at any rate," I returned.

"Well, maybe he's asleep, and maybe he's not; it's hard to be up to him. Where's Mr. Verney? though it doesn't much matter about him—it's Donal he always sets to watch."

Mr. Verney is in his study."

"Very well, I suppose this is as good a time as any other. If Donal knew what I was going to do, it's the last story I'd ever tell, maybe. He has a terrible jealousy of even a word ever being said about poor Mrs. Verney, or the slightest allusion made to that time at all. I think he has an idea

that Miss Catherine talked to you about her mother, and that was one reason he was always watching when you were together, that, and because, for some reason or other, he was anxious for her to be married to Mr. Nugent, and was mad when he found out she was going on with Mr. Percival. Whist, was that a step?"

She stood up, and, opening the door, stood outside listening for a few minutes. Then she came in, shut the door as closely as it was capable of being shut, placed a chair against it, that it might not be opened without our hearing, and then, taking a chair as far from it as possible, motioned to me to sit near her, and, in a low voice, began.

END OF VOL. I.



